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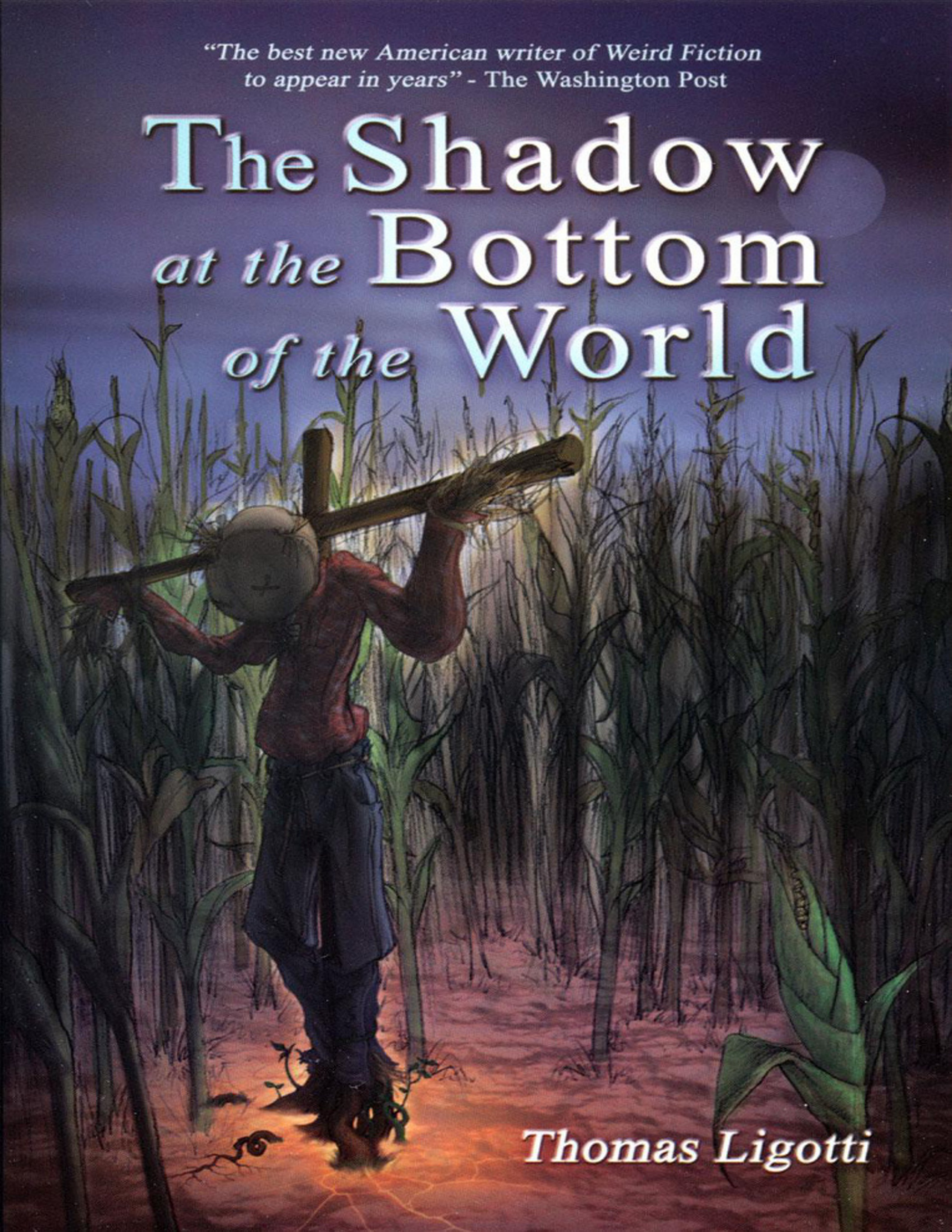
The Shadow at the Bottom of the World



Thomas Ligotti

The Shadow At the Bottom of the World

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“Thomas Ligotti is an absolute master of supernatural horror and weird fiction, and a true original. He pursues his unique vision with admirable honesty andrigorousness and conveys it in prose as powerfully evocative as any writer in the field. I’d say he might just be a genius.”

—Ramsey Campbell

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Songs of a Dead Dreamer

Grimscribe: His Lives and Works

Noctuary

The Agonizing Resurrection of Victor Frankenstein & Other Gothic Tales
The Nightmare Factory

In a Foreign Town, In a Foreign Land

I Have a Special Plan for This World

This Degenerate Little Town

My Work Is Not Yet Done: Three Tales of Corporate Horror Crampton

Death Poems

3

Foreword by Douglas A. Anderson

4

Cold Spring address

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To the memory of my uncles Leonard Ligotti and Joseph Mazzo.

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Foreword

In the historical development of the artistic horror story, there are three major figures. The first is, of course, Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), the father of the modern psychological horror story. The next, chronologically, is H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937), who brought cosmicism—an awareness of the vastness of the universe and of the insignificance of the human race—to the weird tale. And now there is Thomas Ligotti (b. 1953), who has extended Lovecraft's cosmicism by suggesting that an inescapable malignancy and nightmare inheres in all existence, manifesting itself in both the individual psyche and the physical cosmos. Interestingly, these three writers have found the short story rather than the novel to be their ideal vehicle for expression.

For Ligotti, "the short story allows a purer and more intense expression of horror … than do novels."

Born in Detroit, Ligotti grew up in a nearby suburb and in 1977 graduated from Wayne State University with a B.A. in English. From 1979 to 2001 he worked in the literary criticism division of the Gale Research Company (now Thomson Gale), a publisher of reference books. Ligotti then moved to Florida, where he makes his living as an editorial freelancer.

He began writing horror fiction around 1976, and published his first short story in 1981. His first book, a small press collection entitled Songs of a Dead Dreamer, came out in an edition of 300 copies in 1985. Today it is a highly-prized rarity. An expanded edition appeared from a trade publisher in 1989, followed by further collections: Grimscribe (1991), Noctuary (1994), and the omnibus volume The Nightmare Factory (1996). Since then Ligotti has worked mostly with small publishers, like Durtro Press, which has issued elegant limited editions like In a Foreign Town, In a Foreign Land (1997), a collection of four

interconnected stories; an unproduced screenplay, Crampton (2002), written in collaboration with Brandon Trenz; and some small books of Ligotti's

verse, I Have a Special Plan for This World (2000), This Degenerate Little Town (2001), and Death Poems (2004).

In 1994, Silver Salamander Press collected Ligotti's vignettes in The Agonizing Resurrection of Victor Frankenstein & Other Gothic Tales. Another small press, Mythos Books, has published My Work Is Not Yet Done: Three Tales of Corporate Horror (2002), whose eponymous story is Ligotti's lengthiest tale. Forthcoming from Mythos Books is Ligotti's long essay, The Conspiracy Against the Human Race: On the Horror of Life and the Art of Horror, a kind of personal credo of Ligotti's views on life and literature. The two main websites devoted to Ligotti's work are Thomas Ligotti Online (www.ligotti.net) and The Art of Grimscribe (www.ligotti.de.vu). Both websites have a complete Ligotti bibliography, and much else of interest.

The stories in this volume were selected by Ligotti and myself as an introductory sampler of his works. They are arranged in the order in which they were written. Thus, "The Least Feast of Harlequin"— which Ligotti has referred to as the first story he wrote that he thought was good enough not to throw away—opens the collection, and "Purity," one of his most recent tales, concludes it. The bulk of these stories, however, date from the late 1980s and early 1990s, Ligotti's most productive period.

Unlike the bulk of horror fiction past and present, Ligotti's work" is essentially outside the tradition of strict realism in which a neatly demarcated natural world is threatened by a supernatural menace, an aberration in the normal course of things that more often than not maybe combated and conquered.

In the universe of Ligotti's fiction, the natural and the supernatural merge into the same nightmare; to distinguish them is meaningless and no salvation is to be found in this world or any other. As Ligotti has noted, many of his stories "focus on those anomalous moments in which a character's perception of his world is shaken and he is forced to confront a frightening and essentially chaotic universe." Which is, in its way, a realism of the highest order.

—Douglas A. Anderson

Introduction

HORROR STORIES: A NIGHTMARE SCENARIO

Extracted from the forthcoming book, The Conspiracy against the Human Race: On the Horror of Life and the Art of Horror.

For a horror story to be effective, it must both reflect and deform the world we know, the place in which we eat and fight and procreate. This means that it must not intrude on the sacred ground already being worked by established institutions of faith, which at some point inevitably deviate into the unknowable in order to comfort their audience rather than distress them. Should it follow this craven path, the horror story would lose its greatest value—the power to convey truths that have currency with respect to our evolving trepidations rather than perpetuating some primitive lore of the remote past. A literary law that only the greatest writers in the genre, such as Edgar Allan Poe and H. P. Lovecraft, have followed in their writings maybe stated as follows: No horror tale shall take advantage of its readers by playing upon their religious beliefs. This is an easy and a vile game that only the lowest form of scribe would perpetrate on those who already have their heads filled with all kinds of fears conditioned into them since they were children in the hands of an angry god. Fortunately, we find that a model for creating horror has been provided for us that has nothing to do with preachers and pulpits and the puppetry of doctrinal compliance. This model is given to us in the form of nightmares, which conform to no orthodoxies except those of our developing fears. No bad dream ever ended with its dreamer finding salvation from his mind's hell. Such finales are always invented after the fact by storytellers with a redemptive agenda.

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As necessity dictates to most of us that we must be conscious of death, disease, damage, and derangement, however reluctantly and infrequently we submit to this knowledge, it also forces us to leave that world on a regular timetable and enter another one where we face horrors beyond the natural, warped realities that are produced simply because our brains have

shifted to a different mode of activity and that by the reckoning of our wide-awake selves can only be described as lunatic. An equally apt term would be “supernatural,” since there obtains a tradition of symbolically equating states of mental abnormality with bizarre incidents in the “real” world, as elaborated by Sigmund Freud in his famous essay “The Uncanny” (1919). This is the basis for the longtime association between the supernatural and horror fiction. When we take a ghost from our dreams and place it in the context of waking consciousness, if only in the pages of a ghost story, we have chosen, as though freely and of our own will, to engage in the metaphysics of the mistake. The point of this act is a tangle of motives we cannot begin to unravel any better than all the other actions in which we engage on this earth. The only thing that is certain is that we do this because we are driven to do it. But such speculation is distracting us from our concern of the moment, which is the plot of a supernatural horror story and its source in the nightmare.

It is usually a long and twisted road between the nightmare and a horror story.

As far as offering a writer some useful storyline, nightmares are notorious for generating plots that are either wearyingly simple, and therefore unaffecting outside the confines of the dream, or too complicated to sort out for any kind of sense. Of course, the same might be said of our waking existence. On the one hand, its course tends to present a few basic routines that have no interest in themselves once we strip them down to their bare bones. But we must go through these motions if the show is to go on. We eat because we are hungry and will die if we fail to heed that hunger. We work because we need to provide ourselves with food as well as shelter from the elements. We sleep because we are tired and need to recharge ourselves so that we can work, which in turn enables us to feed and shelter ourselves. But these routines, and the kind of sense behind them, are not sufficient fodder for fiction and would make for painful reading.

On the other hand, things can get so involved and mysterious in our lives that we are hard pressed to determine what is happening 12

or why. One day we are just punching the clock at the biological factory, and the next day we find ourselves embroiled in the strangest situation

because we saw a pretty face or got wind of some words that set off a conflagration of rage that may last only a matter of hours or could drag on for years. At first we may take a stab at explanations, but ultimately we are at a loss to name the mechanism of our initial impulse, to follow its developments and counter-developments, and to know what happened in the end. This is one of the reasons we engage in such activities as reading fiction in the first place: we are unsatisfied or frustrated by the both the basic tedium and the inconclusive, strung-along complexity of our lives. They lack something we desire—meaning …

or, in other words, a plot. No other creature in this world requires anything in the way of meaning, but we appear to be burdened with this desire. This is why the Norwegian philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe regarded human beings as a mistake in the world of nature. We have a desire that can never be satisfied, a need that is not natural, or at least one that is not found elsewhere in nature's kingdom. Nevertheless, we will persist in chasing the impossible and ultimately die trying. This is the tragedy of human existence that Zapffe concluded we do our best to cover up in order to tolerate an existence that holds terrors for us at every turn. Hence, we make up narratives that are rich with meaning, conspiring among ourselves to tell lies in order to create the coherence that both our waking and dreaming lives withhold from us. Thus, there are the mythologies, the religions, and even scientific scenarios that open with a big bang, continue until some characters come along, and then end in entropy. At this stage in history, it may seem unnecessary and more than a little trite to go over this ground upon which so many have trod before us. But we are here concerned with fictional plots— specifically, with plotting a course between the nightmare and the horror story. If we have again wandered off the topic, this should be no surprise. Indeed, we may profit from wandering a bit further.

Part of our inheritance as conscious organisms—creatures who are aware of being alive and know about the inescapability of death— is that we are subject to having nightmares. Every move we make in our lives entails risk. What we risk each time we lie down to sleep is that our minds will drift off like a balloon into a sky freaked with clouds and shadows and be battered about in misadventures of unimaginable madness. While our bodies are held in paralysis, unless

we are sleepwalkers, our consciousness is distorted to the point of the psychotic, roaming through the backstreets of our brains… until the moment when the intensity of our horror becomes too much to allow our slumber to persist, and we are jarred back into wakefulness.

Yet if the nightmare has sufficiently shaken us, it may take some time before we are fully awake. We are alert enough to reach for the lamp and scramble from our bed, rubbing our eyes as if to wipe away the visions to which we have been victim and pressing our hands to our temples to feel our way back to the familiar ground of flesh. But the world of the nightmare has not yet been left behind. So we evacuate that room which has become a chamber of horrors and seek out some other place in our residence—somewhere that is not infected by the insanity we have just endured, somewhere that will accommodate our bodies in an upright position so that we are not prone to sink back into that insane darkness from which we are trying to emerge. Once seated, we may moan and curse in the aftermath of the frightening ordeal through which our consciousness has taken us. The residue of things we never believed we would suffer still plagues our heads with images that keep popping up in the darkness inside us and inner scenarios are played over and over like a tune we cannot rid from our thoughts.

Our bodies continue to shiver with fever of an immaterial disease and its lingering symptoms, its ravages and confusions. No longer entrapped in the dream, we are not yet fully free from its clutches. And the worst part about occupying this transitional zone, the most awful revelation that occurs in this state, is not the nightmare that has just slithered into our skull and nested there for awhile. That particular trauma is complete and the house lights are now up around us, even while we remain in a delirium that might otherwise signal some serious mental disorder, some damage to the system that functions to give us a sense that we are a real person, a normal and continuous self. The worst part of this limbo between two worlds is not the memory of the nightmare that has already passed, receding into some slime-streaked and cobwebbed cavern of memory, but the idea of all those nightmares that have yet to come in our lives and are as sure as anything to

do so. In those interstitial moments between the deformations of a sick dream and a full recovery that sends our minds home from the hospital, we find the prospect of further episodes of this kind, of relapses into the frenzies of the sleeping mind, to be absolutely intolerable. How could we ever again bring ourselves to

take the risk of going back to that bed and descending into dreams. What a monstrous destiny we must helplessly face, each night standing on the precipice of sleep and not knowing what waits below.

However, as previously observed, every move we make in our lives entails risk.

This statement could be truthfully extended to declare not merely risk but, based on facts and figures, the certainty of pain and grief that encompasses us like barbed wire into which, sooner or later, we will run headlong. Few of us vow not to enter an automobile because some of the most grotesque disfigurements and deaths have resulted from this decision. On the other hand, many are dissuaded from knowing the exhilaration offered by riding a motorcycle, whether or not they have heard that surgeons refer to these vehicles as “donorcycles.”

But even the most incautious among us weigh the risks, gauging what prospective harm they find acceptable in light of the rewards involved. Many believe that they have a fair choice in the matter of which doom ultimately overtakes them, and sometimes their lives indeed come to an end approximately as they envisioned. Of course, this is not exactly how they explain their predicament to themselves. They usually remain as oblivious as humanly possible to any nastiness that could waylay their life-plan. While they may have had a close brush with severe physical damage or their own demise, they usually recover from these experiences and, like those who have had a good share of nightmares in their time, eventually go back to sleep … because it is in their sleep that they are looking to die after a long and healthy life. Neither waking nightmares nor non-waking ones have given the human species any pause in its progress. It is not as if a person, once born, or a society, once formed, has ever had any appealing

choice except to carry on as if everything will be all right in the short run and to think about the end of things as little as possible.

Confronting the nightmare on a daily basis and on a conscious level is just not something people are wont to do as a rule. A small number of us, however, have become devout researchers of all types of nightmares and, perhaps due to some fluke or flaw of character, wish to release our findings in the form of what have become casually known as horror stories. The following observations are drawn from my own studies in this area of human experience.

However frightening nightmares may be, plain old horror is not the entirety of their essence, nor is it that of the horror story. Of course, there must be something horrific about them, whether it is 15

being stalked by someone through dark streets or groping your way through an ever-narrowing tunnel or finding yourself receiving a ghostly visitation as mentioned earlier. Yet the quality of a nightmare lies neither in these nor in any other hypothetical horrors as such. What makes a nightmare nightmarish is the sense that something is happening that should not be. While nightmares are the most convenient reference point for this sense of the impossible, the unthinkable, as something that is actually happening, it is not restricted to our sleeping hours.

To give a relatively common example, we might consider the plot of a traffic accident, an event that is commonly experienced as dreamlike in the beginning, as you find yourself suddenly moving along a track of time quite different from the one you knew before the accident began. You may be traveling along slippery roads and then, without warning, find yourself sliding across several lanes of oncoming traffic. You know in principle that such things can easily happen. They may even have happened to you on a prior occasion. You know that they happen to other people all the time. Nevertheless, this accident was not in your plans, which is why it is called an accident. It seems like a mistake, even if it could be explained by a cause-and-effect confluence of circumstances. It was a mistake because you had an idea of how things were supposed to be that day, as you do every day, and spinning helplessly in your car while others try to avoid a collision with you, perhaps unsuccessfully, was not part of your schedule. One

moment you had a firm grip on things; the next moment you are careening toward who knows where. You are not filled with horror, not yet at least, as you spin along the pavement that is slick with rain or snow. At this point, everything is all strangeness. You have been taken to a different place from where you were, and you are no longer in control. Anything could happen now. That is the suspicion that creeps into your thoughts as a nightmare begins. Nothing is safe and nothing is off limits. All of a sudden something was set into motion that changed everything into that which was not meant to be, at least according to your deluded conception of your life and its "meaningful" trajectory. Yet these things happen, as everyone knows. They have always happened and are always happening.

But we isolate the nightmare by calling it imaginary and denying it a place in our real life; we anchor ourselves in a place far away from it, where such "realities" as God and Country rule the wavelengths; we 16

distract ourselves from it by confining our minds to places where it is not; and we sublimate the nightmare by placing it in stories and paintings and other devisings that we may put away at will. If we neglected to do this, we would be living at all times in a world of nightmare… a world that was not meant to be and yet is so. And thus we conspire with ourselves and against ourselves to deny the most obvious facts of the nightmare—death, disease, damage, and derangement. The horror story, by obeying the terms of the nightmare, is a way that, deviously, some people use to think about the unthinkable, to face what we otherwise would not choose to look upon, and, more importantly, to control and give meaning to that which can neither be controlled nor harbors any meaning. It is a perverted mode of defending ourselves from what would demean and destroy us, from what cannot be helped and should never have been—life itself in all its inane grotesquerie. However, for all our efforts to overwrite what has been written, to remake what had been made, to change what cannot be changed, and accept what is unacceptable, we have succeeded only in making a bad situation worse. No matter how many paper monsters we face down, no matter how many nightmares we shake off, the best we can do is open the pages of Poe and recite—with a resigned and sardonic calm, if we can manage it—those words from "The Conqueror Worm" that tell us a story in which there is "much of Madness, and more of Sin And Horror the soul of the plot."

The Last Feast of Harlequin

My interest in the town of Mirocaw was first aroused when I heard that an annual festival was held there which promised to include, to some extent, the participation of clowns among its other elements of pageantry. A former colleague of mine, who is now attached to the anthropology department of a distant university, had read one of my recent articles ("The Clown Figure in American Media," Journal of Popular Culture), and wrote to me that he vaguely remembered reading or being told of a town somewhere in the state that held a kind of "Fool's Feast" every year, thinking that this might be pertinent to my peculiar line of study. It was, of course, more pertinent than he had reason to think, both to my academic aims in this area and to my personal pursuits.

Aside from my teaching, I had for some years been engaged in various anthropological projects with the primary ambition of articulating the significance of the clown figure in diverse cultural contexts. Every year for the past twenty years I have attended the pre-Lenten festivals that are held in various places throughout the southern United States. Every year I learned something more concerning the esoterics of celebration. In these studies I was an eager participant— along with playing my part as an anthropologist, I also took a place behind the clownish mask myself. And I cherished this role as I did nothing else in my life. To me the title of Clown has always carried connotations of a noble sort. I was an adroit jester, strangely enough, and had always taken pride in the skills I worked so diligently to develop.

I wrote to the State Department of Recreation, indicating what information I desired and exposing an enthusiastic urgency which came naturally to me on this topic. Many weeks later I received a tan envelope imprinted with a government logo. Inside was a pamphlet

that catalogued all of the various seasonal festivities of which the state was officially aware, and I noted in passing that there were as many in late

autumn and winter as in the warmer seasons. A letter inserted within the pamphlet explained to me that, according to their voluminous records, no festivals held in the town of Mirocaw had been officially registered. Their files, nonetheless, could be placed at my disposal if I should wish to research this or similar matters in connection with some definite project. At the time this offer was made I was already laboring under so many professional and personal burdens that, with aweary hand, I simply deposited the envelope and its contents in a drawer, never to be consulted again.

Some months later, however, I made an impulsive digression from my responsibilities and, rather haphazardly, took up the Mirocaw project. This happened as I was driving north one afternoon in late summer with the intention of examining some journals in the holdings of a library at another university.

Once out of the city limits the scenery changed to sunny fields and farms, diverting my thoughts from the signs that I passed along the highway.

Nevertheless, the subconscious scholar in me must have been regarding these with studious care. The name of a town loomed into my vision. Instantly the scholar retrieved certain records from some deep mental drawer, and I was faced with making a few hasty calculations as to whether there was enough time and motivation for an investigative side trip. But the exit sign was even hastier in making its appearance, and I soon found myself leaving the highway, recalling the roadsign's promise that the town was no more than seven miles east.

These seven miles included several confusing turns, the forced taking of a temporarily alternate route, and a destination not even visible until a steep rise had been fully ascended. On the descent another helpful sign informed me that I was within the city limits of Mirocaw. Some scattered houses on the outskirts of the town were the first structures I encountered. Beyond them the numerical highway became Townshend Street, the main avenue of Mirocaw.

The town impressed me as being much larger once I was within its limits than it had appeared from the prominence just outside. I saw that the

general hilliness of the surrounding countryside was also an internal feature of Mirocaw. Here, though, the effect was different. The parts of the town did not look as if they adhered very well to one another. This condition might be blamed on the irregular topography

of the town. Behind some of the old stores in the business district, steeply roofed houses had been erected on a sudden incline, their peaks appearing at an extraordinary elevation above the lower buildings. And because the foundations of these houses could not be glimpsed, they conveyed the illusion of being either precariously suspended in air, threatening to topple down, or else constructed with an unnatural loftiness in relation to their width and mass.

This situation also created a weird distortion of perspective. The two levels of structures overlapped each other without giving a sense of depth, so that the houses, because of their higher elevation and nearness to the foreground buildings, did not appear diminished in size as background objects should.

Consequently, a look of flatness, as in a photograph, predominated in this area.

Indeed, Mirocaw could be compared to an album of old snapshots, particularly ones in which the camera had been upset in the process of photography, causing the pictures to develop on an angle: a cone-roofed turret, like a pointed hat jauntily askew, peeked over the houses on a neighboring street; a billboard displaying a group of grinning vegetables tipped its contents slightly westward; cars parked along steep curbs seemed to be flying skyward in the glare-distorted windows of a five-and-ten; people leaned lethargically as they trod up and down sidewalks; and on that sunny day the clock tower, which at first I mistook for a church steeple, cast a long shadow that seemed to extend an impossible distance and wander into unlikely places in its progress across the town. I should say that perhaps the disharmonies of Mirocaw are more acutely affecting my imagination in retrospect than they were on that first day, when I was primarily concerned with locating the city hall or some other center of information.

I pulled around a corner and parked. Sliding over to the other side of the seat, I rolled down the window and called to a passerby: “Excuse me, sir,” I said. The man, who was shabbily dressed and very old, paused for a moment without approaching the car. Though he had apparently responded to my call, his vacant expression did not betray the least awareness of my presence, and for a moment I thought it just a coincidence that he halted on the sidewalk at the same time I addressed him. His eyes were focused somewhere beyond me with a weary and imbecilic gaze. After a few moments he continued on his way and I said nothing to call him back, even though at the last second his face began to appear dimly familiar. Someone else finally came

along who was able to direct me to the Mirocaw City Hall and Community Center.

The city hall turned out to be the building with the clock tower. Inside I stood at a counter behind which some people were working at desks and walking up and down a back hallway. On one wall was a poster for the state lottery: a jack-in-the-box with both hands grasping green bills. After a few moments, a tall, middle-aged woman came over to the counter.

“Can I help you?” she asked in a neutral, bureaucratic voice.

I explained that I had heard about the festival—saying nothing about being a nosy academic—and asked if she could provide me with further information or direct me to someone who could.

“Do you mean the one held in the winter?” she asked. “How many of them are there?”

“Just that one.”

“I suppose, then, that that’s the one I mean.” I smiled as if sharing a joke with her.

Without another word, she walked off into the back hallway. While she was absent I exchanged glances with several of the people behind the counter who periodically looked up from their work.

“There you are,” she said when she returned, handing me a piece of paper that looked like the product of a cheap copy machine. Please Come to the Fun, it said in large letters. Parades, it went on, Street Masquerade, Bands, The Winter Raffle, and The Coronation of the Winter

Queen. The page continued with the mention of a number of miscellaneous festivities. I read the words again. There was something about that imploring little “please” at the top of the announcement that made the whole affair seem like a charity function.

“When is it held? It doesn’t say when the festival takes place.”

“Most people already know that.” She abruptly snatched the page from my hands and wrote something at the bottom. When she gave it back to me, I saw “Dec.

19-21” written in blue-green ink. I was immediately struck by an odd sense of scheduling on the part of the festival committee. There was, of course, solid anthropological and historical precedent for holding festivities around the winter solstice, but the timing of this particular event did not seem entirely practical.

“If you don’t mind my asking, don’t these days somewhat conflict with the regular holiday season? I mean, most people have enough going on at that time.”

“It’s just tradition,” she said, as if invoking some venerable ancestry behind her words.

“That’s very interesting,” I said as much to myself as to her.

“Is there anything else?” she asked.

“Yes. Could you tell me if this festival has anything to do with clowns? I see there’s something about a masquerade.”

“Yes, of course there are some people in … costumes. I’ve never been in that position myself… that is, yes, there are clowns of a sort.”

At that point my interest was definitely aroused, but I was not sure how much further I wanted to pursue it. I thanked the woman for her help and asked the best means of access to the highway, not anxious to retrace the labyrinthine route by which I had entered the town. I walked back to my car with a whole flurry of half-formed questions, and as many vague and conflicting answers, cluttering my mind.

The directions the woman gave me necessitated passing through the south end of Mirocaw. There were not many people moving about in this section of town. Those that I did see, shuffling lethargically down a block of battered storefronts, exhibited the same sort of forlorn expression and manner as the old man from whom I had asked directions earlier. I must have been traversing a central artery of this area, for on either side stretched street after street of poorly tended yards and houses bowed with age and indifference. When I came to a stop at a streetcorner, one of the citizens of this slum passed in front of my car.

This lean, morose, and epicene person turned my way and sneered outrageously with a taut little mouth, yet seemed to be looking at no one in particular.

After progressing a few streets farther, I came to a road that led back to the highway. I felt detectably more comfortable as soon as I found myself traveling once again through the expanses of sun-drenched farmlands.

I reached the library with more than enough time for my research, and so I decided to make a scholarly detour to see what material I could find that might illuminate the winter festival held in Mirocaw. The library, one of the oldest in the state, included in its holdings the entire run of the Mirocaw Courier. I thought this would be an excellent place to start. I soon found, however, that there was no handy way to research information from this

newspaper, and I did not want to engage in a blind search for articles concerning a specific subject.

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I next turned to the more organized resources of the newspapers for the larger cities located in the same county, which incidentally shares its name with Mirocaw. I uncovered very little about the town, and almost nothing concerning its festival, except in one general article on annual events in the area that erroneously attributed to Mirocaw a “large Middle-Eastern community” which every spring hosted a kind of ethnic jamboree. From what I had already observed, and from what I subsequently learned, the citizens of Mirocaw were solidly midwestern American, the probable descendants in a direct line from some enterprising pack of New Englanders of the last century. There was one brief item devoted to a Mirocavian event, but this merely turned out to be an obituary notice for an old woman who had quietly taken her life around Christmastime.

Thus, I returned home that day all but empty-handed on the subject of Mirocaw.

However, it was not long afterward that I received another letter from the former colleague of mine who had first led me to seek out Mirocaw and its festival. As it happened, he rediscovered the article that caused him to stir my interest in a local “Fool’s Feast.” This article had its sole appearance in an obscure festschrift of anthropology studies published in Amsterdam twenty years ago. Most of these papers were in Dutch, a few in German, and only one was in English: “The Last Feast of Harlequin: Preliminary Notes on a Local Festival.”

It was exciting, of course, finally to be able to read this study, but even more exciting was the name of its author: Dr. Raymond Thoss.

Before proceeding any further, I should mention something about Thoss, and inevitably about myself. Over two decades ago, at my alma mater in Cambridge, Mass., Thoss was a professor of mine. Long before playing a role in the events I am about to describe, he was already one of the most important figures in my life. A striking personality, he inevitably influenced

everyone who came in contact with him. I remember his lectures on social anthropology, how he turned that dim room into a brilliant and profound circus of learning. He moved in an uncannily brisk manner. When he swept his arm around to indicate some common term on the blackboard behind him, one felt he was presenting nothing less than an item of fantastic

qualities and secret value. When he replaced his hand in the pocket of his old jacket this fleeting magic was once again stored away in its well-worn pouch, to be retrieved at the sorcerer's discretion. We sensed he was teaching us more than we could possibly learn, and that he himself was in possession of greater and deeper knowledge than he could possibly impart. On one occasion I summoned up the audacity to offer an interpretation—which was somewhat opposed to his own—regarding the tribal clowns of the Hopi Indians. I implied that personal experience as an amateur clown and special devotion to this study provided me with an insight possibly more valuable than his own. It was then he disclosed, casually and very obiter dicta, that he had actually acted in the role of one of these masked tribal fools and had celebrated with them the dance of the kachinas. In revealing these facts, however, he somehow managed not to add to the humiliation I had already inflicted upon myself. And for this I was grateful to him. Thoss's activities were such that he sometimes became the object of gossip or romanticized speculation. He was a fieldworker par excellence, and his ability to insinuate himself into exotic cultures and situations, thereby gaining insights where other anthropologists merely collected data, was renowned. At various times in his career there had been rumors of his having "gone native" a la the Frank Hamilton Cushing legend. There were hints, which were not always irresponsible or cheaply glamorized, that he was involved in projects of a freakish sort, many of which focused on New England. It is a fact that he spent six months posing as a mental patient at an institution in western Massachusetts, gathering information on the "culture" of the psychically disturbed. When his book Winter Solstice: The Longest Night of a Society was published, the general opinion was that it was disappointingly subjective and impressionistic, and that, aside from a few moving but "poetically obscure"

observations, there was nothing at all to give it value. Those who defended Thoss claimed he was a kind of super-anthropologist: while much of his work emphasized his own mind and feelings, his experience had in fact penetrated to a rich core of hard data which he had yet to disclose in objective discourse. As a student of Thoss, I tended to support this latter estimation of him. For a variety of tenable and untenable reasons, I believed Thoss capable of unearthing hitherto inaccessible strata of human existence. So it was gratifying at first that this article entitled "The Last

Feast of Harlequin" seemed to uphold the Thoss mystique, and in an area I personally found captivating.

Much of the content of the article I did not immediately comprehend, given its author's characteristic and often strategic obscurities. On first reading, the most interesting aspect of this brief study—the "notes" encompassed only twenty pages—was the general mood of the piece. Thoss's eccentricities were definitely present in these pages, but only as a struggling inner force which was definitely contained—incarcerated, I might say—by the somber rhythmic movements of his prose and by some gloomy references he occasionally called upon. Two references in particular shared a common theme. One was a quotation from Poe's "The Conqueror Worm," which Thoss employed as a rather sensational epigraph. The point of the epigraph, however, was nowhere echoed in the text of the article save in another passing reference. Thoss brought up the well-known genesis of the modern Christmas celebration, which of course descends from the Roman Saturnalia. Then, making it clear he had not yet observed the Mirocaw festival and had only gathered its nature from various informants, he established that it too contained many, even more overt, elements of the Saturnalia. Next he made what seemed to me a trivial and purely linguistic observation, one that had less to do with his main course of argument than it did with the equally peripheral Poe epigraph. He briefly mentioned that an early sect of the Syrian Gnostics called themselves "Saturnians" and believed, among other religious heresies, that mankind was created by angels who were in turn created by the Supreme Unknown. The angels, however, did not possess the power to make their creation an erect being

and for a time he crawled upon the earth like a worm. Eventually, the Creator remedied this grotesque state of affairs.

At the time I supposed that the symbolic correspondences of mankind's origins and ultimate condition being associated with worms, combined with a year-end festival recognizing the winter death of the earth, was the gist of this Thossian "insight," a poetic but scientifically valueless observation.

Other observations he made on the Mirocaw festival were also strictly etic; in other words, they were based on secondhand sources, hearsay testimony. Even at that juncture, however, I felt Thoss knew more than he disclosed; and, as I later discovered, he had indeed included information on certain aspects of Mirocaw suggesting he

was already in possession of several keys which for the moment he was keeping securely in his own pocket. By then I myself possessed a most revealing morsel of knowledge. A note to the "Harlequin" article apprised the reader that the piece was only a fragment in rude form of a more wide-ranging work in preparation. This work was never seen by the world. My former professor had not published anything since his withdrawal from academic circulation some twenty years ago. Now I suspected where he had gone.

For the man I had stopped on the streets of Mirocaw and from whom I tried to obtain directions, the man with the disconcertingly lethargic gaze, had very much resembled a superannuated version of Dr. Raymond Thoss.

And now I have a confession to make. Despite my reasons for being enthusiastic about Mirocaw and its mysteries, especially its relationship to both Thoss and my own deepest concerns as a scholar—I contemplated the days ahead of me with no more than a feeling of frigid numbness and often with a sense of profound depression. Yet I had no reason to be surprised at this emotional state, which had little relevance to the outward events in my life but was determined by inward conditions that worked according to their own, quite enigmatic, seasons and cycles. For many years, at least since my university days, I have suffered from this dark malady, this recurrent

despondency in which I would become buried when it came time for the earth to grow cold and bare and the skies heavy with shadows. Nevertheless, I pursued my plans, though somewhat mechanically, to visit Mirocaw during its festival days, for I superstitiously hoped that this activity might diminish the weight of my seasonal despair. In Mirocaw would be parades and parties and the opportunity to play the clown once again.

For weeks in advance I practiced my art, even perfecting a new feat of juggling magic, which was my special forte in foolery. I had my costumes cleaned, purchased fresh makeup, and was ready. I received permission from the university to cancel some of my classes prior to the holiday, explaining the nature of my project and the necessity of arriving in the town a few days before the festival began, in order to

do some preliminary research, establish informants, and so on. Actually, my plan was to postpone any formal inquiry until after the festival and to involve myself beforehand as much as possible in its activities. I would, of course, keep a journal during this time.

There was one resource I did want to consult, however. Specifically, I returned to that out-state library to examine those issues of the Mirocaw Courier dating from December two decades ago. One story in particular confirmed a point Thoss made in the “Harlequin” article, though the event it chronicled must have taken place after Thoss had written his study.

The Courier story appeared two weeks after the festival had ended for that year and was concerned with the disappearance of a woman named Elizabeth Beadle, the wife of Samuel Beadle, a hotel owner in Mirocaw. The county authorities speculated that this was another instance of the “holiday suicides” which seemed to occur with inordinate seasonal regularity in the Mirocaw region. Thoss documented this phenomenon in his “Harlequin” article, though I suspect that today these deaths would be neatly categorized under the heading “seasonal affective disorder”. In any case, the authorities searched a half-frozen lake near the outskirts of Mirocaw where they had found many successful suicides in years past. This

year, however, no body was discovered. Alongside the article was a picture of Elizabeth Beadle. Even in the grainy microfilm reproduction one could detect a certain vibrancy and vitality in Mrs. Beadle's face. That an hypothesis of "holiday suicide" should be so readily posited to explain her disappearance seemed strange and in some way unjust.

Thoss, in his brief article, wrote that every year there occurred changes of a moral or spiritual cast which seemed to affect Mirocaw along with the usual winter metamorphosis. He was not precise about its origin or nature but stated, in typically mystifying fashion, that the effect of this "subseason" on the town was conspicuously negative. In addition to the number of suicides actually accomplished during this time, there was also a rise in treatment of "hypochondriacal" conditions, which was how the medical men of twenty years past characterized these cases in discussions with Thoss. This state of affairs would gradually worsen and finally reach a climax during the days scheduled for the Mirocaw festival. Thoss speculated that given the secretive nature of small towns, the situation was probably even more intensely pronounced than casual investigation could reveal.

The connection between the festival and this insidious subseasonal climate in Mirocaw was a point on which Thoss did not come to any rigid conclusions. He did write, nevertheless, that these two "climatic aspects" had had a parallel existence in the town's history as far back as available records could document.

A late nineteenth-century history of Mirocaw County speaks of the town by its original name of New Colstead, and castigates the townspeople for holding a "ribald and soulless feast" to the exclusion of normal Christmas observances.

(Thoss comments that the historian had mistakenly fused two distinct aspects of the season, their actual relationship being essentially antagonistic.) The "Harlequin" article did not trace the festival to its earliest appearance (this may not have been possible), though Thoss emphasized the New England origins of Mirocaw's founders. The festival, therefore, was one imported from this region and could reasonably be extended at least a

century; that is, if it had not been brought over from the Old World, in which case its roots would become indefinite until further research could be done. Surely Thoss's allusion to the Syrian Gnostics suggested the latter possibility could not entirely be ruled out.

But it seemed to be the festival's link to New England that nourished Thoss's speculations. He wrote of this patch of geography as if it were an acceptable place to end the search. For him, the very words "New England" seemed to be stripped of all traditional connotations and had come to imply nothing less than a gateway to all lands, both known and suspected, and even to ages beyond the civilized history of the region. Having been educated partly in New England, I could somewhat understand this sentimental exaggeration, for indeed there are places that seem archaic beyond chronological measure, appearing to transcend relative standards of time and achieving a kind of absolute antiquity which cannot be logically fathomed. But how this vague suggestion related to a small town in the Midwest I could not imagine. Thoss himself observed that the residents of Mirocaw did not betray any mysteriously primitive consciousness. On the contrary, they appeared superficially unaware of the genesis of their winter merrymaking. That such a tradition had endured through the years, however, even eclipsing the conventional Christmas holiday, revealed a profound awareness of the festival's meaning and function.

I cannot deny that what I had learned about the Mirocaw festival 28

did inspire a trite sense of fate, especially given the involvement of such an important figure from my past as Thoss. It was the first time in my academic career that I knew myself to be better suited than anyone else to discern the true meaning of scattered data, even if I could only attribute this special authority to chance circumstances. Nevertheless, as I sat in that library on a morning in mid December I doubted for a moment the wisdom of setting out for Mirocaw rather than returning home, where the more familiar rite de passage of winter depression awaited me. My original scheme was to avoid the cyclical blues the season held for me, but it seemed this was also a part of the history of Mirocaw, only on a much larger scale. My emotional instability, however, was exactly what qualified me most for the particular fieldwork ahead, though I did not take pride or

consolation in the fact. And to retreat would have been to deny myself an opportunity that might never offer itself again. In retrospect, there seems to have been no fortuitous resolution to the decision I had to make.

As it happened, I went ahead to the town.

Just past noon, on December 18, I started driving toward Mirocaw. A blur of dull, earthen-colored scenery extended in every direction. The snowfalls of late autumn had been sparse, and only a few white patches appeared in the harvested fields along the highway. The clouds were gray and abundant. Passing by a stretch of forest, I noticed the black, ragged clumps of abandoned nests clinging to the twisted mesh of bare branches. I thought I saw black birds skittering over the road ahead, but they were only dead leaves and they flew into the air as I drove by.

I approached Mirocaw from the south, entering the town from the direction I had left it on my visit the previous summer. This took me once again through that part of town which seemed to exist on the wrong side of some great invisible barrier dividing the desirable sections of Mirocaw from the undesirable. As lurid as this district had appeared to me under the summer sun, in the thin light of that winter afternoon it degenerated into a pale phantom of itself. The frail stores and starved-looking houses suggested a borderline region between the material and nonmaterial worlds, with one sardonically wearing 29

the mask of the other. I saw a few gaunt pedestrians who turned as I passed by, though seemingly not because I passed by, making my way up to the main street of Mirocaw.

Driving up the steep rise of Townshend Street, I found the sights there comparatively welcoming. The rolling avenues of the town were in readiness for the festival. Streetlights had their poles raveled with evergreen, the fresh boughs proudly conspicuous in a barren season. On the doors of many of the businesses on Townshend were holly wreaths, equally green but observably plastic. However, although there was nothing unusual in this traditional greenery of the season, it soon became apparent to me that Mirocaw had quite abandoned itself to this particular symbol of Yuletide. It was garishly in evidence everywhere. The windows of stores and houses

were framed in green lights, green streamers hung down from storefront awnings, and the beacons of the Red Rooster Bar were peacock green floodlights. I supposed the residents of Mirocaw desired these decorations, but the effect was one of excess. An eerie emerald haze permeated the town, and faces looked slightly reptilian.

At the time I assumed that the prodigious evergreen, holly wreaths, and colored lights (if only of a single color) demonstrated an emphasis on the vegetable symbols of the Nordic Yuletide, which would inevitably be muddled into the winter festival of any northern country just as they had been adopted for the Christmas season. In his "Harlequin" article Thoss wrote of the pagan aspect of Mirocaw's festival, likening it to the ritual of a fertility cult, with probable connections to chthonic divinities at some time in the past. But Thoss had mistaken, as I had, what was only part of the festival's significance for the whole.

The hotel at which I had made reservations was located on Townshend. It was an old building of brown brick, with an arched doorway and a pathetic coping intended to convey an impression of neoclassicism. I found a parking space in front and left my suitcases in the car.

When I first entered the hotel lobby it was empty. I thought perhaps the Mirocaw festival would have attracted enough visitors to at least bolster the business of its only hotel, but it seemed I was mistaken. Tapping a little bell, I leaned on the desk and turned to look at a small, traditionally decorated Christmas tree on a table near the

entranceway. It was complete with shiny, egg-fragile bulbs; miniature candy canes; flat, laughing Santas with arms wide; a star on top nodding awkwardly against the delicate shoulder of an upper branch; and colored lights that bloomed out of flower-shaped sockets. For some reason this seemed to me a sorry little piece.

"May I help you?" said a young woman arriving from a room adjacent to the lobby.

I must have been staring rather intently at her, for she looked away and seemed quite uneasy. I could hardly imagine what to say to her or how to explain what I was thinking. In person she immediately radiated a chilling brilliance of manner and expression. But if this woman had not committed suicide twenty years before, as the newspaper article had suggested, neither had she aged in that time.

“Sarah,” called a masculine voice from the invisible heights of a stairway. A tall, middle-aged man came down the steps. “I thought you were in your room,”

said the man, whom I took to be Samuel Beadle. Sarah, not Elizabeth, Beadle glanced sideways in my direction to indicate to her father that she was conducting the business of the hotel. Beadle apologized to me, and then excused the two of them for a moment while they went off to one side to continue their exchange.

I smiled and pretended everything was normal, while trying to remain within earshot of their conversation. They spoke in tones that suggested their conflict was a familiar one: Beadle’s overprotective concern with his daughter’s whereabouts and Sarah’s frustrated undemanding of certain restrictions placed upon her. The conversation ended, and Sarah ascended the stairs, turning for a moment to give me a facial pantomime of apology for the unprofessional scene that had just taken place.

“Now, sir, what can I do for you?” Beadle asked, almost demanded.

“Yes, I have a reservation. Actually, I’m a day early, if that doesn’t present a problem.” I gave the hotel the benefit of the doubt that its business might have been secretly flourishing.

“No problem at all, sir,” he said, presenting me with the registration form, and then a brass-colored key dangling from a plastic disc bearing the number 44.

“Luggage?”

“Yes, it’s in my car.”

“I’ll give you a hand with that.”

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While Beadle was settling me in my fourth-floor room it seemed an opportune moment to broach the subject of the festival, the holiday suicides, and perhaps, depending upon his reaction, the fate of his wife. I needed a respondent who had lived in the town for a good many years and who could enlighten me about the attitude of Mirocavians toward their season of sea-green lights.

“This is just fine,” I said about the clean but somber room. “Nice view. I can see the bright green lights of Mirocaw just fine from up here. Is the town usually all decked out like this? For the festival, I mean.”

“Yes, sir, for the festival,” he replied mechanically.

“I imagine you’ll probably be getting quite a few of us out-of-towners in the next couple days.”

“Could be. Is there anything else?”

“Yes, there is. I wonder if you could tell me something about the festivities.”

“Such as …”

“Well, you know, the clowns and so forth.”

“Only clowns here are the ones that’re … well, picked out, I suppose you would say.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Excuse me, sir. I’m very busy right now. Is there anything else?”

I could think of nothing at the moment to perpetuate our conversation. Beadle wished me a good stay and left.

I unpacked my suitcases. In addition to regular clothing I had also brought along some of the items from my clown's wardrobe. Beadle's comment that the clowns of Mirocaw were "picked out" left me wondering exactly what purpose these street masqueraders served in the festival. The clown figure has had so many meanings in different times and cultures. The jolly, well-loved joker familiar to most people is actually but one aspect of this protean creature. Madmen, hunchbacks, amputees, and other abnormals were once considered natural clowns; they were elected to fulfil a comic role which could allow others to see them as ludicrous rather than as terrible reminders of the forces of disorder in the world. But sometimes a cheerless jester was required to draw attention to this same disorder, as in the case of King Lear's morbid and honest fool, who of course was eventually hanged, and so much for his clownish wisdom. Clowns have often had ambiguous and sometimes contradictory roles to play. Thus, I knew 32

enough not to brashly jump into costume and cry out, "Here I am again!"

That first day in Mirocaw I did not stray far from the hotel. I read and rested for a few hours and then ate at a nearby diner. Through the window beside my table I watched the winter night turn the soft green glow of the town into a harsh and almost totally new color as it contrasted with the darkness. The streets of Mirocaw seemed to me unusually busy for a small town at evening. Yet it was not the kind of activity one normally sees before an approaching Christmas holiday. This was not a crowd of bustling shoppers loaded with bright bags of presents. Their arms were empty, their hands shoved deep in their pockets against the cold, which nevertheless had not driven them to the solitude of their presumably warm houses. I watched them enter and exit store after store without buying; many merchants remained open late, and even the places that were closed had left their neons illuminated. The faces that passed the window of the diner were possibly just stiffened by the cold, I thought; frozen into deep frowns and nothing else. In the same window I saw the reflection of my own face.

It was not the face of an adept clown; it was slack and flabby and at that moment seemed the face of someone less than alive. Outside was the town of Mirocaw, its streets dipping and rising with a lunatic severity, its citizens packing the sidewalks, its heart bathed in green: as promising a field of

professional and personal challenge as I had ever encountered—and I was bored to the point of dread. I hurried back to my hotel room.

“Mirocaw has another coldness within its cold,” I wrote in my journal that night. “Another set of buildings and streets that exists behind the visible town’s facade like a world of disgraceful back alleys.” I went on like this for about a page, across which I finally engraved a big “X”. Then I went to bed.

In the morning I left my car at the hotel and walked toward the main business district a few blocks away. Mingling with the good people of Mirocaw seemed like the proper thing to do at that point in my scientific sojourn. But as I began laboriously walking up Townshend (the sidewalks were cramped with wandering pedestrians), aglimpse of someone suddenly replaced my haphazard plan with a more specific and immediate one. Through the crowd and about fifteen paces ahead was my goal.

33

“Dr. Thoss,” I called.

His head almost seemed to turn and look back in response to my shout, but I could not be certain. I pushed past several warmly wrapped bodies and green-scarved necks, only to find that the object of my pursuit appeared to be maintaining the same distance from me, though I did not know if this was being done deliberately or not. At the next corner, the dark-coated Thoss abruptly turned right onto a steep street which led downward directly toward the dilapidated south end of Mirocaw. When I reached the corner I looked down the sidewalk and could see him very clearly from above. I also saw how he managed to stay so far ahead of me in a mob that had impeded my own progress. For some reason the people on the sidewalk made room so that he could move past them easily, without the usual jostling of bodies. It was not a dramatic physical avoidance, though it seemed nonetheless intentional. Fighting the tight fabric of the throng, I continued to follow Thoss, losing and regaining sight of him.

By the time I reached the bottom of the sloping street the crowd had thinned out considerably, and after walking a block or so farther I found myself

practically a lone pedestrian pacing behind a distant figure that I hoped was still Thoss.

He was now walking quite swiftly and in a way that seemed to acknowledge my pursuit of him, though really it felt as if he were leading me as much as I was chasing him. I called his name a few more times at a volume he could not have failed to hear, assuming that deafness was not one of the changes to have come over him; he was, after all, not a young man, nor even a middle-aged one any longer.

Thoss suddenly crossed in the middle of the street. He walked a few more steps and entered a signless brick building between a liquor store and a repair shop of some kind. In the "Harlequin" article Thoss had mentioned that the people living in this section of Mirocaw maintained their own businesses, and that these were patronized almost exclusively by residents of the area. I could well believe this statement when I looked at these little sheds of commerce, for they had the same badly weathered appearance as their clientele. The formidable shoddiness of these buildings notwithstanding, I followed Thoss into the plain brick shell of what had been, or possibly still was, a diner.

Inside it was unusually dark. Even before my eyes made the adjustment I sensed that this was not a thriving restaurant cozily 34

cluttered with chairs and tables—as was the establishment where I had eaten the night before—but a place with only a few disarranged furnishings, and very cold. It seemed colder, in fact, than the winter streets outside.

"Dr. Thoss?" I called toward a lone table near the center of the long room.

Perhaps four or five were sitting around the table, with some others blending into the dimness behind them. Scattered across the top of the table were some books and loose papers. Seated there was an old man indicating something in the pages before him, but it was not Thoss. Beside him were two youths whose wholesome features distinguished them from the grim weariness of the others. I approached the table and they all looked up at me. None of them showed a glimmer of emotion except the two boys, who exchanged worried and guilt-ridden glances with each other, as if they had

just been discovered in some shameful act. They both suddenly burst from the table and ran into the dark background, where a light appeared briefly as they exited by a back door.

“I’m sorry,” I said diffidently. “I thought I saw someone I knew come in here.”

They said nothing. Out of a back room others began to emerge, no doubt interested in the source of the commotion. In a few moments the room was crowded with these tramp-like figures, all of them gazing emptily in the dimness. I was not at this point frightened of them; at least I was not afraid they would do me any physical harm. Actually, I felt as if it was quite within my power to pummel them easily into submission, their mousy faces almost inviting a succession of firm blows. But there were so many of them.

They slid slowly toward me in a worm-like mass. Their eyes seemed empty and unfocused, and I wondered a moment if they were even aware of my presence.

Nevertheless, I was the center upon which their lethargic shuffling converged, their shoes scuffing softly along the bare floor. I began to deliver a number of hasty inanities as they continued to press toward me, their weak and unexpectedly odorless bodies nudging against mine. (I understood now why the people along the sidewalks seemed to instinctively avoid Thoss.) Unseen legs became entangled with my own; I staggered and then regained my balance. This sudden movement aroused me from a kind of mesmeric daze into which I must have fallen without being aware of it. I had intended to leave that dreary place long before events had

reached such a juncture, but for some reason I could not focus my intentions strongly enough to cause myself to act. My mind had been drifting farther away as these slavish things approached. In a sudden surge of panic I pushed through their soft ranks and was outside.

The open air revived me to my former alertness, and I immediately started pacing swiftly up the hill. I was no longer sure that I had not simply

imagined what had seemed, and at the same time did not seem, like a perilous moment. Had their movements been directed toward a harmful assault, or were they trying merely to intimidate me? As I reached the green-glazed main street of Mirocaw I really could not determine what had just happened.

The sidewalks were still jammed with a multitude of pedestrians, who now seemed more lively than they had been only a short time before. There was a kind of vitality that could only be attributed to the imminent festivities. A group of young men had begun celebrating prematurely and strode noisily across the street at midpoint, obviously intoxicated. From the laughter and joking among the still sober citizens I gathered that, mardi-gras style, public drunkenness was within the traditions of this winter festival. I looked for anything to indicate the beginnings of the Street Masquerade, but saw nothing: no brightly garbed harlequins or snow-white pierrots. Were the ceremonies even now in preparation for the coronation of the Winter Queen? "The Winter Queen," I wrote in my journal. "Figure of fertility invested with symbolic powers of revival and prosperity. Elected in the manner of a high school prom queen. Check for possible consort figure in the form of a representative from the underworld."

In the pre-darkness hours of December 19 I sat in my hotel room and wrote and thought and organized. I did not feel too badly, all things considered. The holiday excitement which was steadily rising in the streets below my window was definitely infecting me. I forced myself to take a short nap in anticipation of a long night. When I awoke, Mirocaw's annual feast had begun.

Shouting, commotion, carousing. Sleepily I went to the window and looked out over the town. It seemed all the lights of Mirocaw 36

were shining, save in that section down the hill which became part of the black void of winter. And now the town's greenish tinge was even more pronounced, spreading everywhere like a great green rainbow that had melted from the sky and endured, phosphorescent, into the night. In the streets was the brightness of an artificial spring. The byways of Mirocaw vibrated with activity: on a nearby corner a brass band blared; marauding cars blew their horns and were sometimes mounted by laughing

pedestrians; a man emerged from the Red Rooster Bar, threw up his arms, and crowed. I looked closely at the individual celebrants, searching for the vestments of clowns. Soon, delightedly, I saw them. The costume was red and white, with matching cap, and the face painted a noble alabaster. It almost seemed to be a clownish incarnation of that white-bearded and blackbooted Christmas fool.

This particular fool, however, was not receiving the affection and respect usually accorded to a Santa Claus. My poor fellow-clown was in the middle of a circle of revelers who were pushing him back and forth from one to the other.

The object of this abuse seemed to accept it somewhat willingly, but this little game nevertheless appeared to have humiliation as its purpose. “Only clowns here are the one’s that’re picked out,” echoed Beadle’s voice in my memory. “Picked on” seemed closer to the truth.

Packing myself in some heavy clothes, I went out into the green gleaming streets. Not far from the hotel I was stumbled into by a character with a wide blue and red grin and bright baggy clothes. Actually he had been shoved into me by some youths outside a drugstore.

“See the freak,” said an obese and drunken fellow. “See the freak fell.”

My first response was anger, and then fear as I saw two others flanking the fat drunk. They walked toward me and I tensed myself for a confrontation.

“This is a disgrace,” one said, the neck of awine bottle held loosely in his left hand.

But it was not to me they were speaking; it was to the clown, who had been pushed to the sidewalk. His three persecutors helped him up with a sudden jerk and then splashed wine in his face. They ignored me altogether.

“Let him loose,” the fat one said. “Crawl away, freak. Oh, he flies!”

The clown trotted off, becoming lost in the throng.

“Wait a minute,” I said to the rowdy trio, who had started lumbering away. I quickly decided that it would probably be futile to ask them to explain what I had just witnessed, especially amid the noise and confusion of the festivities.

In my best jovial fashion I proposed we all go someplace where I could buy them each a drink. They had no objection and in a short while we were all squeezed around a table in the Red Rooster.

Over several drinks I explained to them that I was from out of town, which pleased them no end for some reason. I told them there were things I did not understand about their festival.

“I don’t think there’s anything to understand,” the fat one said. “It’s just what you see.”

I asked him about the people dressed as clowns.

“Them? They’re the freaks. It’s their turn this year. Everyone takes their turn.

Next year it might be mine. Or yours,” he said, pointing at one of his friends across the table. “And when we find out which one you are—”

“You’re not smart enough,” said the defiant potential freak.

This was an important point: the fact that individuals who played the clowns remain, or at least attempted to remain, anonymous. This arrangement would help remove inhibitions a resident of Mirocaw might have about abusing his own neighbor or even a family relation. From what I later observed, the extent of this abuse did not go beyond a kind of playful roughhousing. And even so, it was only the occasional group of rowdies who actually took advantage of this aspect of the festival, the majority of the citizens very much content to stay on the sidelines.

As far as being able to illuminate the meaning of this custom, my three young friends were quite useless. To them it was just amusement, as I imagine it was to the majority of Mirocavians. This was understandable. I suppose the average person would not be able to explain exactly how the profoundly familiar Christmas holiday came to be celebrated in its present form.

I left the bar alone and not unaffected by the drinks I had consumed there.

Outside, the general merrymaking continued. Loud music emanated from several quarters. Mirocaw had fully transformed itself from a sedate small town to an enclave of Saturnalia within the dark immensity of a winter night. But Saturn is also the

planetary symbol of melancholy and sterility, a clash of opposites contained within that single word. And as I wandered half-drunkenly down the street, I discovered that there was a conflict within the winter festival itself. This discovery indeed appeared to be that secret key which Thoss withheld in his study of the town. Oddly enough, it was through my unfamiliarity with the outward nature of the festival that I came to know its true nature.

I was mingling with the crowd on the street, warmly enjoying the confusion around me, when I saw a strangely designed creature lingering on the corner up ahead. It was one of the Mirocaw clowns. Its clothes were shabby and nondescript, almost in the style of a tramp-type clown, but not humorously exaggerated enough. The face, though, made up for the lackluster costume. I had never seen such a strange conception for a clown's countenance. The figure stood beneath a dim streetlight, and when it turned its head my way I realized why it seemed familiar. The thin, smooth, and pale head; the wide eyes; the oval-shaped features resembling nothing so much as the skull-faced, screaming creature in that famous painting (memory fails me). This clownish imitation rivalled the original in suggesting stricken realms of abject horror and despair: an inhuman likeness more proper to something under the earth than upon it.

From the first moment I saw this creature, I thought of those inhabitants of the ghetto down the hill. There was the same nauseating passivity and languor in its bearing. Perhaps if I had not been drinking earlier I would not have been bold enough to take the action I did. I decided to join in one of the upstanding traditions of the winter festival, for it annoyed me to see this morbid impostor of a clown standing up. When I reached the corner I laughingly pushed myself into the creature—"Whoops!" —who stumbled backward and ended up on the sidewalk. I laughed again and looked around for approval from the festivalers in the vicinity. No one, however, seemed to appreciate or even acknowledge what I had done. They did not laugh with me or point with amusement, but only passed by, perhaps walking a little faster until they were some distance from this streetcorner incident. I realized instantly I had violated some tacit rule of behavior, though I had thought my action well within the common practice. The idea occurred to me that I might even be apprehended and prosecuted for what in any other circumstances was

certainly a criminal act. I turned around to help the clown back to his feet, hoping to somehow redeem my offense, but the creature was gone. Solemnly I walked away from the scene of my inadvertent crime and sought other streets away from its witnesses.

Along the various back avenues of Mirocaw I wandered, pausing exhaustedly at one point to sit at the counter of a small sandwich shop that was packed with customers. I ordered a cup of coffee to revive my overly alcoholed system.

Warming my hands around the cup and sipping slowly from it, I watched the people outside as they passed the front window. It was well after midnight but the thick flow of passersby gave no indication that anyone was going home early. A carnival of profiles filed past the window and I was content simply to sit back and observe, until finally one of these faces made me start. It was that frightful little clown I had roughed up earlier. But although its face was familiar in its ghastly aspect, there was something different about it. And I wondered that there should be two such hideous freaks.

Quickly paying the man at the counter, I dashed out to get a second glimpse of the clown, who was now nowhere in sight. The dense crowd kept me from pursuing this figure with any speed, and I wondered how the clown could have made its way so easily ahead of me. Unless the crowd had instinctively allowed this creature to pass unhindered through its massive ranks, as it did for Thoss. In the process of searching for this particular freak, I discovered that interspersed among the celebrating populous of Mirocaw, which included the sanctioned festival clowns, there was not one or two, but a considerable number of these pale, wraith-like creatures. And they all drifted along the streets unmolested by even the rowdiest of revelers. I now understood one of the taboos of the festival. These other clowns were not to be disturbed and should even be avoided, much as were the residents of the slum at the edge of town.

Nevertheless, I felt instinctively that the two groups of clowns were somehow identified with each other, even if the ghetto clowns were not welcome at Mirocaw's winter festival. Indeed, they were not simply part of the community and celebrating the season in their own way. To all appearances, this group of melancholy mummers constituted nothing less than an entirely independent festival—a festival within a festival.

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Returning to my room. I entered my suppositions into the journal I was keeping for this venture. The following are excerpts: There is a superstitiousness displayed by the residents of Mirocaw with regard to these people from the slum section, particularly as they lately appear in those dreadful faces signifying their own festival. What is the relationship between these simultaneous celebrations? Did one precede the other? If so, which? My opinion at this point—and I claim no conclusiveness for it—is that Mirocaw's winter festival is the later manifestation, that it appeared after the festival of those depressingly pallid clowns, in order to cover it up or mitigate its effect. The holiday suicides come to mind, and the subclimate Thoss wrote about, the disappearance of Elizabeth Beadle twenty years ago, and my own experience with this pariah clan existing outside yet within the community. Of my own experience with this emotionally deleterious subseason I would rather not speak at this time.

Still not able to say whether or not my usual winter melancholy is the cause. On the general subject of mental health, I must consider Thoss's book about his stay in a psychiatric hospital (in western Mass., almost sure of that. Check on this book & Mirocaw's New England roots).

The winter solstice is tomorrow, albeit sometime past midnight (how blurry these days and nights are becoming!). It is, of course, the day of the year in which night hours surpass daylight hours by the greatest margin. Note what this has to do with the suicides and a rise in psychic disorder. Recalling Thoss's list of documented suicides in his article, there seemed to be a recurrence of specific family names, as there very likely might be for any kind of data collected in a small town. Among these names was a Beadle or two. Perhaps, then, there is a genealogical basis for the suicides which has nothing to do with Thoss's mystical subclimate, which is a colorful idea to be sure and one that seems fitting for this town of various outward and inward aspects, but is not a conception that can be substantiated.

One thing that seems certain, however, is the division of Mirocaw into two very distinct types of citizenry, resulting in two festivals and the appearance of similar clowns—a term now used in an extremely loose sense. But there is a connection, and I believe I have some idea of what it is. I said before that the normal residents of the town regard those from the ghetto, and especially their clown figures, with superstition. Yet it's more than that: there is fear, perhaps a kind of hatred—the particular kind of hatred resulting from some powerful and irrational memory. What threatens Mirocaw I think I can very well understand. I recall the incident earlier today in that vacant diner. "Vacant" is the appropriate

word here, despite its contradiction of fact. The congregation of that halflit room formed less a presence than an absence, even considering the oppressive number of them. Those eyes that did not or could not focus on anything, the pining lassitude of their faces, the lazy march of their feet. I was spiritually drained when I ran out of there. I then understood why these people and their activities are avoided.

I cannot question the wisdom of those ancestral Mirocavians who began the tradition of the winter festival and gave the town a pretext for celebration and social intercourse at a time when the consequences of brooding isolation are most severe, those longest and darkest days of the solstice. A mood of Christmas joviality obviously would not be sufficient to counter the menace of this season. But even so, there are still the suicides of individuals who are somehow cut off, I imagine, from the vitalizing activities of the festival.

It is the nature of this insidious subseason that seems to determine the outward forms of Mirocaw's winter festival: the optimistic greenery in a period of gray dormancy; the fertile promise of the Winter Queen; and, most interesting to my mind, the clowns. The bright clowns of Mirocaw who are treated so badly; they appear to serve as substitute figures for those dark-eyed mummers of the slums.

Since the latter are feared for some power or influence they possess, they may still be symbolically confronted and conquered through their counterparts, who are elected for precisely this function. If I am right about this, I wonder to what extent there is a conscious awareness among the town's populace of this indirect show of aggression. Those three young men I spoke with tonight did not seem to possess much insight beyond seeing that there was a certain amount of robust fun in the festival's tradition. For that matter, how much awareness is there on the other side of these two antagonistic festivals? Too horrible to think of such a thing, but I must wonder if, for all their apparent aimlessness, those inhabitants of the ghetto are not the only ones who know what they are about. No denying that behind those inhumanly limp expressions there seems to lie a kind of obnoxious intelligence.

Now I realize the confusion of my present state, but as I wobbled from street to street tonight, watching those oval-mouthed clowns, I could not help feeling that all the merrymaking in Mirocaw was somehow allowed only by their sufferance. This I hope is no more than a fanciful Thossian intuition, the sort of idea that is curious and thought-provoking without ever seeming to gain the benefit of proof. I know my mind is not entirely lucid, but I feel that it may be possible to penetrate Mirocaw's

many complexities and illuminate the hidden side of the festival season. In particular I must look for the significance of the other festival. Is it also some kind of fertility celebration? From what I have seen, the tenor of this "celebrating" sub-group is one of anti-fertility, if anything. How have they managed to keep from dying out completely over the years? How do they maintain their numbers?

But I was too tired to formulate any more of my sodden speculations. Falling onto my bed, I soon became lost in dreams of streets and faces.

I was, of course, slightly hung over when I woke up late the next morning. The festival was still going strong, and blaring music outside roused me from a nightmare. It was a parade. A number of floats proceeded down Townshend, a familiar color predominating. There were theme floats of pilgrims and Indians, cowboys and Indians, and clowns of an orthodox type. In the middle of it all was the Winter Queen herself, freezing atop an icy throne. She waved in all directions. I even imagined she waved up at my dark window.

In the first few groggy moments of wakefulness I had no sympathy with my excitation of the previous night. But I discovered that my former enthusiasm had merely lain dormant, and soon returned with an even greater intensity. Never before had my mind and senses been so active during this usually inert time of year. At home I would have been playing lugubrious old records and looking out the window quite a bit. I was terribly grateful in a completely abstract way for my commitment to a meaningful mania. And I was eager to get to work after I had had some breakfast at the coffee shop.

When I got back to my room I discovered the door was unlocked. And there was something written on the dresser mirror. The writing was red and greasy, as if done with a clown's make-up pencil—my own, I realized. I read the legend, or rather I should say riddle, several times: "What buries itself before it is dead?" I looked at it for quite awhile, very shaken at how vulnerable my holiday fortifications were. Was this supposed to be a warning of some kind? A threat to the effect that if I persisted in a certain

course I would end up prematurely interred? I would have to be careful, I told myself. My resolution was to let 43

nothing deter me from the inspired strategy I had conceived for myself. I wiped the mirror clean, for it was now needed for other purposes.

I spent the rest of the day devising a very special costume and the appropriate face to go with it. I easily shabbied up my overcoat with a torn pocket or two and a complete set of stains. Combined with blue jeans and a pair of rather scuffed-up shoes, I had a passable costume for a derelict. The face, however, was more difficult, for I had to experiment from memory. Conjuring a mental image of the screaming pierrot in that painting {The Scream, I now recall), helped me quite a bit. At nightfall I exited the hotel by the back stairway.

It was strange to walk down the crowded street in this gruesome disguise. Though I thought I would feel conspicuous, the actual experience was very close, I imagined, to one of complete invisibility. No one looked at me as I strolled by, or as they strolled by, or as we strolled by each other. I was a phantom—perhaps the ghost of festivals past, or those yet to come.

I had no clear idea where my disguise would take me that night, only vague expectations of gaining the confidence of my fellow specters and possibly in some way coming to know their secrets. For a while I would simply wander around in that lackadaisical manner I had learned from them, following their lead in any way they might indicate. And for the most part this meant doing almost nothing and doing it silently. If I passed one of my kind on the sidewalk there was no speaking, no exchange of knowing looks, no recognition at all that I was aware of. We were there on the streets of Mirocaw to create a presence and nothing more. At least this is how I came to feel about it. As I drifted along with my bodiless invisibility, I felt myself more and more becoming an empty, floating shape, seeing without being seen and walking without the interference of those grosser creatures who shared my world. It was not an experience completely without interest or even pleasure. The clown's shibboleth of "here we are again" took on a new meaning for me as I felt myself a novitiate of a more rarified order of harlequinry. And very soon the opportunity to make further progress along this path presented itself.

Going the opposite direction, down the street, a pickup truck slowly passed, gently parting a sea of zigging and zagging celebrants. The cargo in the back of this truck was curious, for it was made up entirely of my fellow sectarians. At the end of the block the truck

stopped and another of them boarded it over the back gate. One block down I saw still another get on. Then the truck made a U-turn at an intersection and headed in my direction.

I stood at the curb as I had seen the others do. I was not sure the truck would pick me up, thinking that somehow they knew I was an imposter. The truck did, however, slow down, almost coming to a stop when it reached me. The others were crowded on the floor of the truck bed. Most of them were just staring into nothingness with the usual indifference I had come to expect from their kind.

But a few actually glanced at me with some anticipation. For a second I hesitated, not sure I wanted to pursue this ruse any further. At the last moment, some impulse sent me climbing up the back of the truck and squeezing myself in among the others.

There were only a few more to pick up before the truck headed for the outskirts of Mirocaw and beyond. At first I tried to maintain a clear orientation with respect to the town. But as we took turn after turn through the darkness of narrow country roads, I found myself unable to preserve any sense of direction.

The majority of the others in the back of the truck exhibited no apparent awareness of their fellow passengers. Guardedly, I looked from face to ghostly face. A few of them spoke in short whispered phrases to others close by. I could not make out what they were saying but the tone of their voices was one of innocent normalcy, as if they were not of the hardened slum-herd of Mirocaw.

Perhaps, I thought, these were thrill-seekers who had disguised themselves as I had done, or, more likely, initiates of some kind. Possibly they had

received prior instructions at such meetings as I had stumbled onto the day before. It was also likely that among this crew were those very boys I had frightened into a precipitate exit from that old diner.

The truck was now speeding along a fairly open stretch of country, heading toward those higher hills that surrounded the now distant town of Mirocaw. The icy wind whipped around us, and I could not keep myself from trembling with cold. This definitely betrayed me as one of the newcomers among the group, for the two bodies that pressed against mine were rigidly still and even seemed to be radiating a frigidity of their own. I glanced ahead at the darkness into which we were rapidly progressing.

We had left all open country behind us now, and the road was 45

enclosed by thick woods. The mass of bodies in the truck leaned into one another as we began traveling up a steep incline. Above us, at the top of the hill, were lights shining somewhere within the woods. When the road levelled off, the truck made an abrupt turn, steering into what looked like a great ditch.

There was an unpaved path, however, upon which the truck proceeded toward the glowing in the near distance.

This glowing became brighter and sharper as we approached it, flickering upon the trees and revealing stark detail where there had formerly been only smooth darkness. As the truck pulled into a clearing and came to a stop, I saw a loose assembly of figures, many of which held lanterns that beamed with a dazzling and frosty light. I stood up in the back of the truck to unboard as the others were doing. Glancing around from that height I saw approximately thirty more of those cadaverous clowns milling about. One of my fellow passengers spied me lingering in the truck and in a strangely highpitched whisper told me to hurry, explaining something about the “apex of darkness”. I thought again about this solstice night; it was technically the longest period of darkness of the year, even if not by a very significant margin from many other winter nights. Its true significance, though, was related to considerations having little to do with either statistics or the calendar.

I went over to the place where the others were forming into a tighter crowd, which betrayed a sense of expectancy in the subtle gestures and expressions of its individual members. Glances were now exchanged, the hand of one lightly touched the shoulder of another, and a pair of circled eyes gazed over to where two figures were setting their lanterns on the ground about six feet apart. The illumination of these lanterns revealed an opening in the earth. Eventually the awareness of everyone was focused on this roundish pit, and as if by prearranged signal we all began huddling around it. The only sounds were those of the wind and our own movements as we crushed frozen leaves and sticks underfoot.

Finally, when we had all surrounded this gaping hole, the first one jumped in, leaving our sight for a moment but then reappearing to take hold of a lantern which another handed him from above. The miniature abyss filled with light, and I could see it was no more than six feet deep. One of its walls opened into the mouth of a tunnel. The figure holding the lantern stooped a little and disappeared into the

passage.

Each of us, in turn, dropped into the darkness of this pit, and every fifth one took a lantern. I kept to the back of the group, for whatever subterranean activities were going to take place, I was sure I wanted to be on their periphery. When only about ten of us remained on the ground above, I maneuvered to let four of them precede me so that as the fifth I might receive a lantern.

This was exactly how it worked out, for after I had leaped to the bottom of the hole a light was ritually handed down to me. Turning about-face, I quickly entered the passageway. At that point I shook so with cold that I was neither curious nor afraid, but only grateful for the shelter.

I entered a long, gently sloping tunnel, just high enough for me to stand upright. It was considerably warmer down there than outside in the cold darkness of the woods. After a few moments I had sufficiently thawed out so that my concerns shifted from those of physical comfort to a sudden and

justified preoccupation with my survival. As I walked I held my lantern close to the sides of the tunnel. They were relatively smooth as if the passage had not been made by manual digging but had been burrowed by something which left behind a clue to its dimensions in the tunnel's size and shape. This delirious idea came to me when I recalled the message that had been left on my hotel room mirror: "What buries itself before it is dead?"

I had to hurry along to keep up with those uncanny spelunkers who preceded me.

The lanterns ahead bobbed with every step of their bearers, the lumbering procession seeming less and less real the farther we marched into that snug little tunnel. At some point I noticed the line ahead of me growing shorter. The processioners were emptying out into a cavernous chamber where I, too, soon arrived. This area was about thirty feet in height, its other dimensions approximating those of a large ballroom. Gazing into the distance above made me uncomfortably aware of how far we had descended into the earth. Unlike the smooth sides of the tunnel, the walls of this cavern looked jagged and irregular, as though they had been gnawed at. The earth had been removed, I assumed, either through the tunnel from which we had emerged, or else by way of one of the many other black openings that I saw around the edges of the chamber, for possibly they too led back to the surface.

But the structure of this chamber occupied my mind a great deal less than did its occupants. There to meet us on the floor of the great 47

cavern was what must have been the entire slum population of Mirocaw, and more, all with the same eerily wide-eyed and oval-mouthed faces. They formed a circle around an altar-like object which had some kind of dark, leathery covering draped over it. Upon the altar, another covering of the same material concealed a lumpy form beneath.

And behind this form, looking down upon the altar, was the only figure whose face was not greased with makeup.

He wore a long snowy robe that was the same color as the wispy hair berimming his head. His arms were calmly at his sides. He made no

movement. The man I once believed would penetrate great secrets stood before us with the same professorial bearing that had impressed me so many years ago, yet now I felt nothing but dread at the thought of what revelations lay pocketed within the abysmal folds of his magisterial attire. Had I really come here to challenge such a formidable figure? The name by which I knew him seemed itself insufficient to designate one of his stature. Rather I should name him by his other incarnations: god of all wisdom, scribe of all sacred books, father of all magicians, thrice great and more—rather I should call him Thoth.

He raised his cupped hands to his congregation and the ceremony was underway.

It was all very simple. The entire assembly, which had remained speechless until this moment, broke into the most horrendous highpitched singing that can be imagined. It was a choir of sorrow, of shrieking delirium, and of shame. The cavern rang shrilly with the dissonant, whining chorus. My voice, too, was added to the congregation's, trying to blend with their maimed music. But my singing could not imitate theirs, having a huskiness unlike their cacophonous keening wail. To keep from exposing myself as an intruder I continued to mouth their words without sound. These words were a revelation of the moody malignancy which until then I had no more than sensed whenever in the presence of these figures.

They were singing to the "unborn in paradise," to the "pure unlived lives." They sang a dirge for existence, for all its vital forms and seasons. Their ideals were those of darkness, chaos, and a melancholy half-existence consecrated to all the many shapes of death. A sea of thin, bloodless faces trembled and screamed with perverted hopes. And the robed, guiding figure at the heart of all this—elevated over

the course of twenty years to the status of high priest—was the man from whom I had taken so many of my own life's principles. It would be useless to describe what I felt at that moment and a waste of the time I need to describe the events which followed.

The singing abruptly stopped and the towering white-haired figure began to speak. He was welcoming those of the new generation—twenty winters had passed since the “Pure Ones” had expanded their ranks. The word “pure” in this setting was a violence to what sense and composure I still retained, for nothing could have been more foul than what was to come. Thoss—and I employ this defunct identity only as a convenience—closed his sermon and drew closer to the dark-skinned altar. Then, with all the flourish of his former life, he drew back the topmost covering. Beneath it was a limp-limbed effigy, a collapsed puppet sprawled upon the slab. I was standing toward the rear of the congregation and attempted to keep as close to the exit passage as I could. Thus, I did not see everything as clearly as I might have.

Thoss looked down upon the crooked, dolllike form and then out at the gathering. I even imagined that he made knowing eyecontact with myself. He spread his arms and a stream of continuous and unintelligible words flowed from his moaning mouth. The congregation began to stir, not greatly but perceptibly.

Until that moment there was a limit to what I believed was the evil of these people. They were, after all, only that. They were merely morbid, selftortured souls with strange beliefs. If there was anything I had learned in all my years as an anthropologist it was that the world is infinitely rich in strange ideas, even to the point where the concept of strangeness itself had little meaning for me. But with the scene I then witnessed, my conscience bounded into a realm from which it will never return.

For now was the transformation scene, the culmination of every harlequinade.

It began slowly. There was increasing movement among those on the far side of the chamber from where I stood. Someone had fallen to the floor and the others in the area backed away. The voice at the altar continued its chanting. I tried to gain a better view but there were too many of them around me. Through the mass of obstructing bodies I caught only glimpses of what was taking place.

The one who had swooned to the floor of the chamber seemed to 49

be losing all former shape and proportion. I thought it was a clown's trick.

They were clowns, were they not? I myself could make four white balls transform into four black balls as I juggled them. And this was not my most astonishing feat of clownish magic. And is there not always a sleight-of-hand inherent in all ceremonies, often dependent on the transported delusions of the celebrants?

This was a good show, I thought, and giggled to myself. The transformation scene of Harlequin throwing off his fool's facade. O God, Harlequin, do not move like that! Harlequin, where are your arms? And your legs have melted together and begun squirming upon the floor. What horrible, mouthing umbilicus is that where your face should be? What is it that buries itself before it is dead? The almighty serpent of wisdom—the Conqueror Worm.

It now started happening all around the chamber. Individual members of the congregation would gaze emptily—caught for a moment in a frozen trance—and then collapse to the floor to begin the sickening metamorphosis. This happened with ever-increasing frequency the louder and more frantic Thoss chanted his insane prayer or curse. Then there began a writhing movement toward the altar, and Thoss welcomed the things as they curled their way to the altar-top. I knew now what lax figure lay upon it.

This was Kora and Persephone, the daughter of Ceres and the Winter Queen: the child abducted into the underworld of death. Except this child had no supernatural mother to save her, no living mother at all. For the sacrifice I witnessed was an echo of one that had occurred twenty years before, the carnival feast of the preceding generation—o carneval Now both mother and daughter had become victims of this subterranean sabbath. I finally realized this truth when the figure stirred upon the altar, lifted its head of icy beauty, and screamed at the sight of mute mouths closing around her.

I ran from the chamber into the tunnel. (There was nothing else that could be done, I have obsessively told myself.) Some of the others who had not yet changed began to pursue me. They would have caught up to me, I have no doubt, for I fell only a few yards into the passage. And for a moment I imagined that I too was about to undergo a transformation, but I had not

been prepared as the others had been. When I heard the approaching footsteps of my pursuers I was sure there was an even worse fate facing me upon the altar. But the footsteps ceased and retreated. They had received an order in the 50

voice of their high priest. I too heard the order, though I wish I had not, for until then I had imagined that Thoss did not remember who I was. It was that voice which taught me otherwise.

For the moment I was free to leave. I struggled to my feet and, having broken my lantern in the fall, retraced my way back through cloacal blackness.

Everything seemed to happen very quickly once I emerged from the tunnel and climbed up from the pit. I wiped the reeking greasepaint from my face as I ran through the woods and back to the road. A passing car stopped, though I gave it no other choice except to run me down.

“Thank you for stopping.”

“What the hell are you doing out here?” the driver asked.

I caught my breath. “It was a joke. The festival. Friends thought it would be funny. … Please drive on.”

My ride let me off about a mile out of town, and from there I could find my way.

It was the same way I had come into Mirocaw on my first visit the summer before.

I stood for a while at the summit of that high hill just outside the city limits, looking down upon the busy little hamlet. The intensity of the festival had not abated, and would not until morning. I walked down toward the welcoming glow of green, slipped through the festivities unnoticed, and returned to the hotel. No one saw me go up to my room. Indeed, there was an atmosphere of absence and abandonment throughout that building, and the desk in the lobby was unattended.

I locked the door to my room and collapsed upon the bed.

When I awoke the next morning I saw from my window that the town and surrounding countryside had been visited during the night by a snowstorm, one which was entirely unpredicted. The snow was still falling on the now deserted streets of Mirocaw. The festival was over. Everyone had gone home.

And this was exactly my own intention. Any action on my part concerning what I had seen the night before would have to wait until I was away from the town. I am still not sure it will do the slightest 51

good to speak up like this. Any accusations I could make against the slum populace of Mirocaw would be resisted, as well they should be, as unbelievable.

Perhaps in a very short while none of this will be my concern.

With packed suitcases in both hands I walked up to the front desk to check out.

The man behind the desk was not Samuel Beadle, and he had to fumble around to find my bill.

“Here we are. Everything all right?”

“Fine,” I answered in a dead voice. “Is Mr. Beadle around?”

“No, I’m afraid he’s not back yet. Been out all night looking for his daughter.

She’s a very popular girl, being the Winter Queen and all that nonsense.

Probably find she was at a party somewhere.”

A little noise came out of my throat.

I threw my suitcases in the back seat of my car and got behind the wheel. On that morning nothing I could recall seemed real to me. The snow was

falling and I watched it through my windshield, slow and silent and entrancing. I started up my car, routinely glancing in my rear view mirror. What I saw there is now vividly framed in my mind, as it was framed in the back window of my car when I turned to verify its reality.

In the middle of the street behind me, standing ankle-deep in snow, was Thoss and another figure. When I looked closely at the other I recognized him as one of the boys whom I surprised in that diner. But he had now taken on a corrupt and listless resemblance to his new family. Both he and Thoss stared at me, making no attempt to forestall my departure. Thoss knew that this was unnecessary.

I had to carry the image of those two dark figures in my mind as I drove back home. But only now has the full weight of my experience descended upon me. So far I have claimed illness in order to avoid my teaching schedule. To face the normal flow of life as I had formerly known it would be impossible. I am now very much under the influence of a season and a climate far colder and more barren than all the winters in human memory. And mentally retracing past events does not seem to have helped; I can feel myself sinking deeper into a velvety white abyss.

At certain times I could almost dissolve entirely into this inner realm of awful purity and emptiness. I remember those invisible moments when in disguise I drifted through the streets of Mirocaw, untouched by the drunken, noisy forms around me: untouchable. But

instantly I recoil at this grotesque nostalgia, for I realize what is happening and what I do not want to be true, though Thoss proclaimed it was. I recall his command to those others as I lay helplessly prone in the tunnel. They could have apprehended me, but Thoss, my old master, called them back. His voice echoed throughout that cavern, and it now reverberates within my own psychic chambers of memory.

“He is one of us,” it said. “He has always been one of us.” It is this voice which now fills my dreams and my days and my long winter nights. I have seen you, Dr. Thoss, through the snow outside my window. Soon I will

celebrate, alone, that last feast which will kill your words, only to prove how well I have learned their truth.

To the memory of H. P. Lovecraft

53

The Shadow At the Bottom of the World

Dr. Voke and Mr. Veech

There is a stairway. It climbs crooked up the side of total darkness. Yet its outlines are visible, like a scribble of lightning engraved upon a black sky.

And though standing unsupported, it does not fall. Nor does it end its jagged ascent until it has reached the obscure loft where Voke, the recluse, has cloistered himself. Someone named Cheev is making his way up the stairway, which seems to trouble him somehow. Though the angular scaffolding as a whole is secure enough, Cheev appears hesitant to place his full weight on the individual steps. A victim of vague misgivings, he ascends in weird mincing movements.

Every so often he looks back over his shoulder at the stairs he has just stepped upon, as if expecting to see the imprints of his soles there, as if the stairs are not made of solid wood but molded of soft clay. But the stairs are unchanged.

Cheev is wearing a long, brightly colored coat. The huge splinters on the railing of the stairway sometimes snag his bulky sleeves. They also snag his bony hands, but Cheev is more exasperated by the destruction of expensive cloth than undear flesh. While climbing, he sucks at a small puncture in his forefinger to keep from staining his coat with blood. At the seventeenth stair above the seventeenth, and last, landing—he trips. The long tails of the coat become tangled between Cheev's legs and there is a ripping sound as he falls. At the end of his patience, Cheev removes the coat and flings it over the side of the stairway into the black abyss. Cheev's arms and legs are very thin.

There is only a single door at the top of the stairs. Behind it is Voke's loft, which appears to be a cross between a playroom and a place of torture. No doubt Cheev notices this when, with five widely splayed fingers pushing against the door, he enters.

The darkness and silence of the great room are compromised only by noisy jets of blue-green light flickering spasmodically along the walls. But for the most part the room lies buried in shadows. Even its exact height is uncertain, since above the convulsive illumination almost nothing can be seen by even the sharpest pair of eyes, never mind Cheev's squinting little slits. Part of the lower cagework of the crisscrossing rafters is visible, but the ceiling is entirely obscured, if in fact Voke's sanctum has been provided with one.

Somewhere above the gritty floor, more than a few life-size dolls hang suspended by wires which gleam and look gummy like wetted strands of a spider web. But none of the dolls is seen in whole: the longbeaked profile of one juts into the light; the shiny satin legs of another find their way out of the upper dimness; a beautifully pale hand glows in the distance; while much closer the better part of a harlequin dangles into view, cut off at the neck by blackness. Much of the inventory of this vast room appears only as parts and pieces of objects which manage to push their way out of the smothering dark. Upon the grainy floor, a long low box thrusts a corner of itself into the scene, showing off reinforced edges of bright metal strips plugged with heavy bolts. Pointed and strangely shaped instruments bloom out of the loam of shadows; they are crusted with …

age. A great wheel appears at quarter-phase in the room's night. Other sections, appendages, and gear-works of curious machines complicate this immense gallery.

As Cheev progresses through the half-light, he is suddenly halted by a metal arm with a soft black handle. He backs off and continues to shuffle through the chamber, grinding sawdust, sand, perhaps pulverized stars underfoot. The dismembered limbs of dolls and puppets are strewn about the floor, drained of their stuffings. Posters, signs, billboards, and leaflets of various sorts are scattered around like playing cards, their bright words disarranged into nonsense. Countless other objects, devices, and leftover goods stock the room, more than one could possibly take notice of. But they are all, in some way, like those which have been described. One wonders, then, how they could all add up to such an atmosphere of… isn't repose the word? Yes, but a certain kind of repose: the repose of ruin.

“Voke,” Cheev calls out. “Doctor, are you here?”

Within the darknesss ahead a tall rectangle suddenly appears, like a ticket-seller’s booth at a carnival. The lower part is composed of 55

wood and the upper part of glass; its interior is lit up by an oily red glare.

Slumped forward on its seat inside the booth, as if asleep, is a well-dressed dummy: nicely-fitting black jacket and vest with bright silver buttons, a white high-collar shirt with silver cufflinks, and a billowing cravat which displays a pattern of moons and stars. Because his head is forwardly inclined, the dummy’s only feature of note is the black sheen of its painted hair.

Cheev approaches the booth a little cautiously. He fails to notice, or considers irrelevant, the inanimate character of the figure inside. Through a semi-circular opening in of the glass, Cheev slides his hand into the booth, apparently with the intention of giving the dummy’s arm a shake. But before his own arm creeps very far toward its goal, several things occur in succession: the dummy casually lifts its head and opens its eyes … it reaches out and places its wooden hand on Cheev’s hand of flesh … and its jaw drops open to dispense a mechanical laugh—yah-ha-ha-ha-ha, yah-ha-ha-ha-ha.

Wresting his hand away from the lurid dummy, Cheev staggers backward a few chaotic steps. The dummy continues to give forth its mocking laughter, which flaps its way into every niche of the evil loft and flies back as peculiar echoes. The dummy’s face is vacant and handsome; its eyes roll like mad marbles.

Then, from out of the shadows behind the dummy’s booth, steps a figure that is every bit as thin as Cheev, though much taller. His outfit is not unlike the dummy’s, but the clothes hang on him, and what there is left of his sparse hair falls like old rags across his bone-white scalp.

“Did you ever wonder, Mr. Veech,” Voke begins, parading slowly toward his guest while holding one side of his coat like the train of a gown, “did you ever wonder what it is that makes the animation of a wooden dummy

so horrible to see, not to mention to hear. Listen to it, I mean really listen. Ya-ha-ha-ha-ha: a stupid series of sounds that becomes excruciatingly eloquent when uttered by the Ticket Man. They are a species of poetry that sings what should not be sung, that speaks what should not be spoken. But what in the world is it laughing about. Nothing, it would seem. No clear motives or impulses make the dummy laugh, and yet it does! Ya-ha-ha-ha-ha, just as pure and as evil as can be.

"'What is this laughter for?' you might be wondering, Mr. Veech. It seems to be for your ears alone, doesn't it? It seems to be directed at every nameless secret of your being. It seems … knowing. And it 56

is knowing, but in another way from what you suppose, in another direction entirely. It is not you the dummy knows, it is only itself. The question is not: 'What is the laughter for,' not at all. The question is: 'Where does it come from?' This is the thing of real horror, in fact. The dummy terrorizes you, while he is really the one in terror.

"Think of it: wood waking up. I can't put it any clearer than that. And let's not forget the paint for the hair and lips, the glass for the eyes. These too are aroused from a sleep that should never have been broken; these too are now part of a tingling network of dummy-nerves, alive and aware in a way we cannot begin to imagine. This is something too painful for tears and so the dummy laughs in your face, trying to give vent to an evil that was no part of his old home of wood and paint and glass. But this evil is now the very essence of its new home—our world, Mr. Veech. This is what is so horrible about the laughing Ticket Man. Go to sleep now, dummy. There, he has his nice silence back. Be glad I didn't make one that screams, Mr. Veech. And be glad the dummy is, after all, just a device.

"Well, to what do I owe your presence here today. It is day, isn't it, or very close to it?"

"Yes, it is," replies Cheev.

"Good, I like to keep abreast of things. What's your latest?" Voke inquires, proceeding to saunter slowly about and admiring the clutter of his loft.

Cheev leans back against a vague mound of indefinable objects and stares at the floor. He sounds drowsy. “I wouldn’t have come here, but I didn’t know what else to do. How can I tell you? The past days and nights, especially the nights, like icy hells. I suppose I should say that there is someone …”

“Whom you have taken a liking to,” Voke finishes.

“Yes, but then there is someone else …”

“Who is somehow an obstacle, someone whose existence helps to insure that your nights will be frosty ones. This seems very straightforward. Tell me, what is her name, the first someone?”

“Prena,” answers Cheev after some hesitation.

“And his, the second.”

“Lamm, but why do you need their names to help me?”

“Their names, like your name, and mine for that matter, are of no actual importance. I was just maintaining a polite interest in your 57

predicament, nothing more. As for helping you, that assumes I have some control over this situation, which thankfully I don’t.”

“But I thought,” stammers Cheev, “the loft, your devices, you seem to have a certain … knowledge.”

“Like the dummy’s knowledge? You shouldn’t have depended on it. Nowyou just have one more disappointment to contend with. One more pain. But listen, can’t you just stick it out? For one reason or another, you could end up forgetting all about this Prena, this Lamm; you might come to realize that they are merely two shadows sewn together by their own delirium. It’s something to consider.

Anything can happen in this world of ours.”

“I can’t wait anymore, Doctor,” says Cheev in a nervous, shadowy voice.

“Well, you know what they say: Something is no worse than something or other with your own shadow. I forget exactly how it goes.”

“I am my own shadow,” Cheev replies.

“Yes, I can see that. Listen now, let us speak hypothetically for a moment. Are you familiar with the Street of Wavering Peaks? I know it has a more common name, but I like to call it that because of all those tall, slanty houses.”

Cheev nods to indicate that he too knows the street.

“Well—and I promise nothing, remember, I make no pledges or vows—but if you can somehow manage to bring both of your friends through that street tonight, I think there might be a solution to your problem, if you really want one. Do you mind what form the solution takes?”

Cheev timidly turns his head side to side, meaning he does not mind.

“You really are serious, aren’t you?”

Cheev says nothing in reply. Voke shrugs and gradually fades back to his point of origin within the deepest shadows of the room. The red light in the booth of the Ticket Man also fades like a setting sun, until the only color left in the room is the ultramarine of the flames burning on the walls. Cheev continues to gaze into the upper reaches of the loft for a few more moments, as if he can already see the slender rooftops of the houses in the Street of Wavering Peaks.

By night, facades of the houses on either side of this narrow street are fused, as if cut from a single piece of very old cardboard. Bonded 58

by shadows and plastered together by moonlight, one house undulates into the next. Aside from their foundations and a few floors with shuttered windows, they are all roof. Splendidly they rise into the night, often reaching fantastic altitudes. At angles determined by an unknown system of forces and fixed forever on destiny’s tilt, they fall into and across the sky.

Tonight the sky is a swamp of murky clouds glowing in the false fire of the moon. From the direction of the street's arched entranceway, three approaching figures are preceded by three elongated shadows. One figure walks ahead, leading the way but lacking the proper gestures of knowledge and authority. Behind are the shapes of a man and a woman, side by side with only a slice of evening's soft radiance between them.

Toward the end of the street, the leading figure stops and the other two catch up with him. They are now all three standing outside one of the loftiest of the peaked houses. This house appears also to serve as a business of some kind, since a large sign, which swings a little in the wind and is muddled by shadows, displays a painted picture of the goods or services sold there: a pair of tongs, or something similar, laying crosswise upon what is perhaps a poker, or some other lengthy implement. But the business is closed for the night and the shutters are secured. A round attic window high above seems to be no more than an empty socket, though from the street—where the three figures have assumed the tentative postures of somnambulists—it is difficult to tell exactly what things are like up there. And now a fog begins to cut off their gaze from the upper regions of the Street of Wavering Peaks.

Cheev looks vaguely distressed, apparently unsure just how much longer they should loiter in this place. Not being privy to what is supposed to occur, if anything, what action should he take? All he can do at the moment is stall. But everything is soon brought to a conclusion, very quickly yet without a sense of haste or violence.

One moment Cheev is drowsily conversing with his two companions, both of them looking sternly suspicious at this point; the next moment it is as if they are two puppets who have been whisked upwards on invisible strings, into the fog and out of sight. It all happens so suddenly that they do not make a sound, though a little later there are faint, hollow screams from high above. Cheev has fallen to his knees and is covering his face with his bony hands.

Two went up, but only one comes down, suspended a few inches from the ground and swinging a little in the wind. Cheev uncovers his eyes and looks at the thing.

Yes, there is only one, but this one has too many … there is too much of everything on this body. Two faces sharing a single head, two mouths that have fallen silent forever with parted lips. The thing continues to hang in the air even after Cheev has completely collapsed on the Street of Wavering Peaks.

Voke's next meeting with Cheev is as unexpected as the last one. There is a disturbance in the loft, and the rigid recluse lugs his bones out of the shadows to investigate. What he sees is Cheev and the Ticket Man both screaming with laughter. Their cachinnations stir up the stagnant air of the loft; they are two maniac twins crying and cackling with a single voice.

"What's going on here, Mr. Veech?" demands Voke.

Cheev ignores him and continues his laughing duet with the dummy. Even after Voke touches the booth and says, "Go to sleep, dummy," Cheev still laughs all by himself, as if he too is an automaton without control over his actions. Voke knocks Cheev to the floor, which seems to hit the right mechanism to shut off his voice. At least he is quiet for a few moments. Then he raises his eyes from the floor and glares up at Voke.

"Why did you have to do that to them?" he asks with a deeply stricken reproachfulness. His voice is rough from all that laughter; it sounds like grinding machinery.

"I'm hot going to pretend I don't know what you're talking about. I have heard about what happened, not that I should care. But you can't hold me responsible, Mr. Veech. I never leave my loft, you know that. However, you're perfectly free to go, if you go now. Haven't you caused me enough trouble!"

"Why did it have to happen like that?" Cheev protests.

“How should I know? You said you didn’t mind what form the solution to your problem took. Besides, I think it all worked out for the best. Those two were making a fool of you, Mr. Veech. They wanted each other and now they have each other, so to speak, while you are free to move on to your next disaster. Wait one moment, I know what’s bothering you,” says Voke with sudden enlightenment.

“You’re distressed because it all ended up with their demise and not yours.

Death is always the best thing, Mr. Veech, but who would have 60

thought you could appreciate such a view? I’ve underestimated you, no doubt about it. My apologies.”

“No,” screams Cheev, quivering like a sick animal. Voke now becomes excited.

“No? Noooo? What is the matter with you, young friend? Why do you set me up for these disappointments? I’ve had quite enough without your adding to the heap.

Take a lesson from the Ticket Man here. Do you see him whining? No, he is silent, he is still. A dummy’s silence is the most soothing silence of all, and his stillness is the perfect stillness of the unborn. He could be making a fuss, but he isn’t. And it is precisely his lack of action, his unfulfilled nature that makes him the ideal companion, my only true friend it seems. Deadwood, I adore you. Look at how his hands rest upon his lap in empty prayer. Look at the noble bearing of his collapsed and powerless limbs. Look at his numb lips muttering nothing, and look at those eyes—how they gaze on and on forever!”

Voke takes a closer look at the dummy’s eyes, and his own begin to lower with dark intentness. He leans against the booth for the closest possible scrutiny, his hands adhering to the glass as if by the force of some powerful suction.

Inside the booth, the dummy’s eyes have changed. They are now dripping little drops of blood, which appear black in the red haze surrounding him.

Voke pulls himself away from the booth and turns to Cheev.

“You’ve been tampering with him!” he bellows as best he can.

Cheev blinks a few leftover tears of false laughter out of his eyes, and his lips form a true smile. “I didn’t do a thing,” he whispers mockingly. “Don’t blame me for your troubles!”

Voke seems to be momentarily paralyzed with outrage, though his face is twisted by a thousand thoughts of action. Cheev apparently is aware of the danger and his eyes search throughout the room, possibly for a means of escape or for a weapon to use against his antagonist. He fixes on something and begins to move toward it in a crouch.

“Where do you think you’re going?” says Voke, now liberated from the disabling effects of his rage.

Cheev is trying to reach something on the floor that is the approximate size and shape of a coffin. Only one corner of the long black box sticks out of the shadows into the bluish green glare of the 61

loft. A thick strip of gleaming silver edges the object and is secured to it with silvery bolts.

“Get away from there,” shouts Voke as Cheev stoops over the box, fingering its lid.

But before he can open it, before he can make another move, Voke makes his.

“I’ve done my best for you, Mr. Veech, and you’ve given me nothing but grief.

I’ve tried to deliver you from the fate of your friends … but now I deliver you to it. Join them, Cheev. “

At these words, Cheev’s body begins to rise in a puppet’s hunch, then soars up into the tenebrous rafters and beyond, transported by unseen wires. His

arms and legs twitch uncontrollably during the elevation, and his screams … fade.

But Voke pays no attention to his victim's progress. His baggy clothes flapping hysterically, he rushes to the object so recently threatened with violation. He drags it toward an open spot on the floor. The light from the walls, ghastly and oceanic, shines on the coffin's silky black surface. Voke is on his knees before the coffin, tenderly testing its security with his fingertips. As if each accumulated moment of deliberation were a blasphemy, he suddenly lifts back the lid.

Laid out inside is a young woman whose beauty has been unnaturally perpetuated by a fanatic of her form. Voke gazes for some time at the corpse, then finally says: "Always the best thing, my dear. Always the best thing."

He is still kneeling before the coffin as his features begin to undergo the ravages of various, obviously conflicting, phases of feeling. Eyes, mouth, the whole facial structure is called upon to perform gruesome acrobatics of expression. Ultimately an impossible task is relieved or avoided by laughter: the liberating laughter of an innocent derangement, of a virgin madness. Voke rises to his feet by the powers of his idiotic hilarity. He begins to move about in a weird dance—hopping and bouncing and bobbing. His laughter grows worse as he gyres aimlessly, and his gestures become more convulsive. Through complete lack of attention, or perhaps by momentarily regaining it, Voke makes his way out of the loft and is now laughing into the dark abyss beyond the precarious railing at the top of the crooked stairway. His final laugh seems to stick in his throat; he goes

over the railing and falls without a sound, his baggy clothes flapping uselessly.

Thus the screams you now hear are not those of the plummeting Voke. Neither are they the screams of Cheev, who is long gone, nor the supernatural echoes of Prena and Lamm's cries of horror. These screams, the ones from beyond the door at the top of the stairs, belong only to a

dummy who now feels warm drops of blood sliding thickly over his lacquered cheeks, and who has been left—alone and alive— in the shadows of an abandoned loft. And his eyes are rolling like mad marbles.

63

The Shadow At the Bottom of the World

Alice’s Last Adventure

Preston, stop laughing. They ate the whole backyard. They ate your mother’s favorite flowers! It’s not funny, Preston.” “Aaaaa ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. Aaaaa ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.”

—PRESTON AND THE STARVING SHADOWS

A long time ago, Preston Penn made up his mind to ignore the passing years and join the ranks of those who remain forever in a kind of half-world between childhood and adolescence. He would not give up the bold satisfaction of eating insects (cripsy flies and crunchy beetles are his favorites), nor that peculiar drunkenness of a child’s brain, induplicable once grown-up sobriety has set perniciously in. The result was that Preston successfully negotiated several decades without ever coming within hailing distance of puberty; he lived unchanged throughout many a perverse adventure in the forties and fifties and even into the sixties. He lived long after I ceased writing about him.

Did he have a prototype? I should say so. One doesn’t just invent a character like Preston using only the pitiful powers of imagination. He was very much a concoction of reality, later adapted for my popular series of children’s books.

Preston’s status in both reality and imagination has always had a great fascination for me. In the past year, however, this issue has especially demanded my attention, not without some personal annoyance and even anxiety.

Then again, perhaps I’m just getting senile.

My age is no secret, since it can be looked up in a number of literary reference sources (see Children’s Authors of Today) whose information is only a few years off—I won’t tell you in which direction. Over two decades ago, when the last Preston book appeared

(Preston and the Upside-Down Face), one reviewer rather snootily referred to me as the "'Grande Damned' of a particular sort of children's literature." What sort you can imagine if you don't otherwise know, if you didn't grow up—or not grow up, as it were—reading Preston's adventures with the Dead Mask, the Starving Shadows, or the Lonely Mirror.

Even as a little girl, I knew I wanted to be an author; and I also knew just the kinds of things I would write. Let someone else give the preadolescents their literary introductions to life and love, guiding them through those volatile years when anything might go wrong, and landing them safely on the shores of incipient maturity. That was never my destiny. I would write about my adventures with Preston— my real-life childhood playmate, as everybody knew. Preston would then initiate others into the mysteries of an upside-down, inside-out, sinistral, always faintly askew (if not entirely reversed) universe. A true avatar of topsy-turveydom, Preston gave himself body and soul to the search—in common places such as pools of rainwater, tarnished ornaments, November afternoons—for zones of fractured numinosity, usually with the purpose of fracturing in turn the bizarre icons of his foul and bloated twin, the adult world. He became a conjurer of stylish nightmares, and what he could do with mirrors gave the grown-ups fits and sleepless nights. No dilettante of the extraordinary, but its embodiment. Such is the spiritual biography of Preston Penn.

But I suppose it was my father, as much as Preston's original, who inspired the stories I've written. To put it briefly, Father had the blood of a child coursing through his big adult body, nourishing the over-sophisticated brain of Foxborough College's associate professor of philosophy. Typical of his character was a love for the books of Lewis Carroll, and thus the genesis of my name, if not my subsequent career. (My mother told me that while she was pregnant, Father willed me into a little Alice.) Father thought of Carroll not merely as a clever storyteller but more as an inhumanly jaded aesthete of the imagination, no doubt projecting some of his own private values onto poor Mr. Dodgson. To him the author of the Alice books was, I think, a personal symbol of power, the strange ideal of an unstrictured mind manipulating reality to its whim and gaining a kind of objective force through the minds of others.

It was very important that I share these books, and many other things, in the same spirit. “See, honey,” he would say while rereading 65

Through the Looking Glass to me, “see how smart little Alice right away notices that the room on the other side of the mirror is not as ‘tidy as the one she just came from. Not as tidy? he repeated with professorial emphasis but chuckling like a child, a strange little laugh that I inherited from him. “Not tidy. We knowwhat that means, don’t we?” I would look up at him and nod with all the solemnity that my six, seven, eight years could muster.

And I did knowwhat that meant. I felt intimations of a thousand discrete and misshapen marvels: of things going wrong in curious ways, of the edge of the world where an endless ribbon of road continued into space by itself, of a universe handed over to new gods. Father would gaze at my round little face, squinting his eyes as if I were giving off light. “Moon face,” he called me.

When I got older, my features became more angular, an involuntary betrayal of my father’s conception of his little Alice, among all the other betrayals once I’d broken the barrier of maturity. I suppose it was a blessing that he did not live to see me grow up and change, saved from disappointment by a sudden explosion in his brain while he was giving a lecture at the college.

But perhaps he would have perceived, as I did not for many years, that my “change” was illusory, that I merely picked up the conventional gestures of an aging soul (nervous breakdown, divorce, remarriage, alcoholism, widowhood, stoic tolerance of a second-rate reality) without destroying the Alice he loved. She was always kept very much alive, though relegated to the role of an author for children. Obviously she endured, because it was she who wrote all those books about her soul mate Preston, even if she has not written one for many years now.

Not too many, I hope. Oh, those years, those years.

So much for the past.

At present I would like to deal with just a single year, the one ending today —about an hour from now, judging by the clock that five minutes ago chimed eleven p.m. from the shadows on the other side of this study. During the past three hundred and sixty-five days I have noticed, sometimes just barely, an accumulation of peculiar episodes in my life. A lack of tidiness, you might say.

(As a result, I've been drinking heavily again; and loneliness is getting to me in ways it never did in the past. Ah, the past.) Some of these episodes are so elusive and insubstantial that it would be impossible to talk about them sensibly, except perhaps in 66

the moods they leave behind like fingerprints, and which I've learned to read like divinatory signs. My task will be much easier if I confine myself to recounting but a few of the incidents, thereby giving them a certain form and structure I so badly need just now. A tidying up, so to speak.

I should start by identifying tonight as that sacred eve which Preston always devotedly observed, celebrating it most intensely in Preston and the Ghost of the Gourd. (At least there should be a few minutes remaining of this immovable feast, according to the clock ticking at my back; though from the look of things, the hands seem stuck on the time I reported a couple of paragraphs ago.

Perhaps I misjudged it before.)

For the past several years I've made an appearance at the local suburban library on this night to give a reading from one of my books as the main event of an annual Hallowe'en fest. Tonight I managed to show up once again for the reading, even if I hesitate to say everything went as usual. Last year, however, I did not make it at all to the costume party. This brings me to what I think is the first in a yearlong series of disruptions unknown to a biography previously marked by nothing more than episodes of conventional chaos. My apologies for taking two steps backward before one step forward. As an old hand at storytelling, I realize this is always a risky approach when bidding for a reader's attention. But here goes.

Around this time last year I attended the funeral of someone from my past, long past. This was none other than that sprite of special genius whose exploits served as the primamateria for my Preston Penn books. The gesture was one of pure nostalgia, for I hadn't actually seen this person since my twelfth birthday party. It was soon afterward that my father died, and my mother and I moved out of our house in North Sable, Mass, (see Childhood Homes of Children's Authors for a photo of the old two-story frame job), heading for the big city and away from sad reminders. A local teacher who knew of my work, and its beginnings in North S, sent me a newspaper clipping from the Sable Sentinel, that reported the demise of my former playmate and even mentioned his secondhand literary fame.

I arrived in town very quietly and was immediately overwhelmed by the lack of change in the place, as if it had existed all those years in a state of suspended animation and had been only recently reanimated for my benefit. It almost seemed that I might run into my old 67

neighbours, schoolmates, and even Mr. So and So who ran the icecream shop, which I was surprised to see still in operation. On the other side of the window, a big man with a walrus mustache was digging ice cream from large cardboard cylinders, while two chubby kids pressed their bellies against the counter. The man hadn't changed in the least over the years. He looked up and saw me staring into the shop, and there really seemed to be a twinkle of recognition in his puffy eyes. But that was impossible. He could have never perceived behind my ancient mask the child's face he once knew, even if he had been Mr. So and So and not his look-alike (son? grandson?). Two complete strangers gawking at each other through a window smeared with the sticky handprints of sloppy patrons. The scene depressed me more than I can say.

Unfortunately, an even more depressing reunion waited a few steps down the street. G. V. Ness and Sons, Funeral Directors. For all the years I'd lived in North Sable, this was only my second visit ("Good-bye, Daddy") to that cold colonial building. But such places always seem familiar, having that perfectly vacant, neutral atmosphere common to all funeral homes, the same in my hometown as in the suburb outside New York ("Good riddance, Hubby") where I'm now secluded.

I strolled into the proper room unnoticed, another anonymous mourner who was a bit shy about approaching the casket. Although I drew a couple of small-town stares, the elderly, elegant author from New York did not stand out as much as she thought she would. But with or without distinction, it remained my intention to introduce myself to the widow as a childhood friend of her deceased husband.

This intention, however, was shot all to hell by two oxlike men who rose from their seats on either side of the grieving lady and lumbered my way. For some reason I panicked.

“You must be Dad’s Cousin Winnie from Boston. The family’s heard so much about you over the years,” they said.

I smiled widely and gulped deeply, which must have looked like a nod of affirmation to them. In any case, they led me over to “Mom” and introduced me under my inadvertent pseudonym to the red-eyed, half-delirious old woman. (Why, I wonder, did I allow this goof to go on?) 68

“Nice to finally meet you, and thank you for the lovely card you sent,” she said, sniffing loudly and working on her eyes with a grotesquely soiled handkerchief. “I’m Elsie.”

Elsie Chester, I thought immediately, though I wasn’t entirely sure that this was the same person who was rumored to have sold kisses and other things to the boys at North Sable Elementary. So he had married her, whaddaya know? Possibly they had to get married, I speculated cattily. At least one of her sons looked old enough to have been the consequence of teenage impatience. Oh, well. So much for Preston’s vow to wed no one less than the Queen of Nightmares.

But even greater disappointments awaited my notice. After chatting emptily with the widow for a few more moments, I excused myself to pay my respects at the coffinside of the deceased. Until then I’d deliberately averted my gaze from that flower-crazed area at the front of the room, where a shiny, pearl-gray casket held its occupant in much the same position as the “Traveling Tomb” racer he’d once constructed. This part of the mortuary ritual never fails to put me in mind of those corpse-viewing sessions to

which children in the nineteenth century were subjected in order to acquaint them with their own mortality. At my age this was unnecessary, so allow me to skip quickly over this scene with a few tragic and inevitable words. …

Bald and blemished, that was unconsciously expected. Totally unfamiliar, that wasn't. The mosquito-faced child I once knew had had his features smushed and spread by the years—bloated, not with death but with having overfed himself at the turgid banquet of life, lethargically pushing away from the table just prior to explosion. A portrait of lazy indulgence. Defunct. Used up. The eternal adult. (But perhaps in death, I consoled myself, a truer self was even now ripping off the false face of the thing before me. This must be so, for the idea of an afterworld populated with a preponderance of old, withered souls is too hideous to contemplate.)

After paying homage to the remains of a memory, I slipped out of that room with a stealth my Preston would have been proud of. I'd left behind an envelope with a modest contribution to the widow's fund. I had half a mind to send a batch of gaping black orchids to the funeral home with a note signed by Laetitia Simpson, Preston's dwarfish girlfriend. But this was something that the other Alice would have done—the one who wrote those strange books.

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As for me, I got into my car and drove out of town to a nice big Holiday Inn near the interstate, where I found a nice suite—spoils of a successful literary career—and a bar. And as it turned out, this overnight layover must take us down another side road (or back road, if you like) of my narrative. Please stand by.

A late-afternoon crowd had settled into the hotel's barroom, relieving me of the necessity of drinking in total solitude, which at the time I was quite prepared to do. After a couple of Scotches on the rocks, I noticed a young man looking my way from the other side of that greenish room. At least he appeared young, extremely so, from a distance. But as I walked over to sit at his table, with a boldness I've never attributed to alcohol, he seemed to gain a few years with every step I took. He was now only relatively young —from an old dowager's point of view, that is. His name was Hank De

Vere, and he worked for a distributor of gardening tools and other such products, in Maine. But let's not pretend to care about the details. Later we had dinner together, after which I invited him to my suite.

It was the next morning, by the way, that inaugurated that yearlong succession of experiences which I'm methodically trying to sort out with a few select examples. Half step forward coming up: pawn to king three.

I awoke in the darkness peculiar to hotel bedrooms, abnormally heavy curtains masking the morning light. Immediately it became apparent that I was alone. My new acquaintance seemed to have a more developed sense of tact and timing than I had given him credit for. At least I thought so at first. But then I looked through the open doorway into the other room, where I could see a convex mirror in an artificial wood frame on the wall.

The bulging eye of the mirror reflected almost the entire next room in convexed perspective, and I noticed someone moving around in there. In the mirror, that is. A tiny, misshapen figure seemed to be gyring about, leaping almost, in a way that should have been audible to me. But it wasn't.

I called out a name I barely remembered from the night before. There came no answer from the next room, but the movement in the mirror stopped, and the tiny figure (whatever it was) disappeared. Very cautiously I got up from the bed, robed myself, and peeked around the corner of the doorway like a curious child on Christmas

morning. A strange combination of relief and confusion arose in me when I saw that there was no one else in the suite.

I approached the mirror, perhaps to search its surface for the little something that might have caused the illusion. My memory is vague on this point, since at the time I was a bit hung over. But I can recall with spectacular vividness what I finally saw after gazing into the mirror for a few moments. Suddenly the sphered glass before me became clouded with a mysterious fog, from the depths of which appeared the waxy face of a

corpse. It was the visage of that old cadaver I'd seen at the funeral home, now with eyes open and staring reproachfully into mine. …

Of course I really saw nothing of the kind. I did not even imagine it, except just now. But somehow this imaginary manifestation seems more fitting and conclusive than what I actually found in the mirror, which was only my old and haggard face … a corpselike countenance if ever there was one.

But there was another conclusion, let's say encore, to this episode with the mirror. A short while later I was checking out, and as the desk clerk was fiddling with my bill, I happened to look out of a nearby window, beyond which two children were romping on the lawn in front of the hotel: an arm-swinging, leaping mime show. After a few seconds the kids caught me watching them. They stopped and stared back at me, standing perfectly still, side by side… then suddenly they were running away. The room took a little spin that only I seemed to notice, while others went calmly about their business. Possibly this experience can be attributed to my failure to employ the usual postdebauch remedies that morning. The old nerves were somewhat shot, and my stomach was giving me no peace. Still, I've remained in pretty fair health over the years, all things considered, and I drove back home without further incident.

That was a year ago. (Get ready for one giant step forward: the old queen is now in play.)

In the succeeding months I noted a number of similar happenings, though they occurred with varying degrees of clarity. Most of them approached the fleeting nature of deja-vu phenomena. A few could be pegged as self-manufactured, while others lacked a definite source. I might see a phrase or the fragment of an image that would make my heart flip over (not a healthy thing at my age), while my mind searched for some correspondence that triggered this powerful sense 71

of repetition and familiarity: the sound of a delayed echo with oblique origins.

I delved into dreams, half-conscious perceptions, and the distortions of memory, but all that remained was a chain of occurrences with links as

weak as smoke rings.

And today, one year later, this tenuous haunting has regained the clarity of the first incident at the hotel. Specifically I refer to a pair of episodes that have caused me to become a little insecure about my psychic balance and to attempt to confirm my lucidity by writing it all out. Organization is what's needed. Thus:

Episode One. Place: The Bathroom. Time: A Little After Eight a.m., the Last Day of October.

The water was running for my morning bath, cascading into the tub a bit noisily for my sensitive ears. The night before, I suffered from an advanced case of insomnia, which even extra doses of my beloved Guardsman's Reserve Stock did not help. I was very glad to see a sunny autumn morning come and rescue me. My bathroom mirror, however, would not let me forget the sleepless night I'd spent, and I combed and creamed myself without noticeable improvement. Sandal was with me, lying atop the toilet tank and scrutinizing the waters of the bowl below.

She was actually staring very hard and deliberately at something. I'd never seen a cat stare at its own reflection and have always been under the impression that they cannot see reflected images of themselves. (Lucky them!) But this one saw something. "What is it, Sandal?" I asked with the patronizing voice of a pet owner. Her tail had a life of its own; she stood up and hissed, then yowled in that horribly demonic falsetto of threatened felines. Finally she dashed out of the bathroom, relinquishing her ground for the first time in all my memory of her.

I had been loitering at the other side of the room, a groggy bystander to an unexpected scene. With a large plastic hairbrush gripped in my left hand, I investigated. I gazed down into the same waters, and though at first they seemed clear enough, something soon appeared from within that porcelain burrow. It had dozens of legs

and looked all backward and inside out, but what was most disgusting about the thing was that it had a tiny human head, one like a baby's except all blue and shriveled.

This latter part, of course, is an exaggeration; or rather, it's an alarm without a fire. It helps if I can tack a neat storybook finish onto these episodes, because what seem to be their real conclusions just 72

leave me hanging. You can't have stories end that way and still expect to hold your reader's esteem. Some genius once said that literature was invented the first time a certain boy cried "Wolf!" and there was none. I suppose this is what I'm doing now. Crying wolf. Not that it's my intention to make a fiction out of what is real. (Much too real, judging by my recent overdrinking and resultant late-night vomiting sessions.) But stories, even very nasty ones, are traditionally considered more satisfying than reality—which, as we all know, is a grossly overrated affair. So don't worry about my cries of wolf. Even if it turns out that I'm making everything up, at least what you have left can be enjoyed as a story—no small value to my mind. It's just a different story, that's all: one about another old-lady author of children's yarns, which, incidentally, has nothing to do with the "truth" one way or the other.

So: Yes, I was in the bathroom, staring into the toilet bowl. The truth is that there was nothing in there, except nice, disinfected water of a bluish tint. The water was still, like a miniature lake, and cruelly reflected a miniature face.

That's all I really saw, my hysterical kitty notwithstanding. I gazed at my wrinkled self in the magic pool for a few moments longer and then cocked the handle to flush it away. (You were right, Father, it doesn't pay to get old and ugly.)

I spent the rest of the morning lying around the baggy old suburban home my second husband left me when he died some years ago. An old war movie on television helped me pass the time. (And vain lady that I am, what I remember most about the war is the shortage of silk and other luxury items, like the quicksilver needed to make a mirror of superior reflective powers.) In the afternoon I began preparing myself for the reading I was to give at the library, the preparation being mostly alcoholic. I've never looked forward to this annual ordeal and only put up with it out of a sense of duty, vanity, and other less comprehensible motives. Maybe this is why I welcomed the excuse to skip it last year. And I wanted to skip it this year,

too, if only I could have come up with a reason satisfactory to the others involved—and, more importantly, to myself. Wouldn't want to disappoint the children, would I? Of course not, though heaven only knows why. Children have made me nervous ever since I stopped being one of them. Perhaps this is why I never had any of my own—adopted any, that is—for the doctors told me long ago that I'm about as fertile as the seas of the moon.

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The other Alice is the one who's really comfortable with kids and kiddish things. How else could she have written Preston and the Laughing This or Preston and the Twitching That? So when it comes time to do this reading every year, I try to put her onstage as much as possible, something that's becoming more difficult with the passing years. Oddly enough, it's my grown-up's weakness for booze that allows me to do this most effectively. Each drink I had this afternoon peeled away a few more winters, and soon I was ready to confront the most brattish child without fear. Which leads me to introduce: Episode Two. Place: The Car in the Driveway. Time: A Radiant Twilight.

With a selection of Preston stories on the seat beside me (I was still undecided on which to read, hoping for inspiration), I was off to do my duty at the library. A routine adjustment of the rearview mirror straightened the slack-mouthed angle it had somehow assumed since I'd last driven the car. The image I saw in the mirror was also routine. Across the street and staring into my car by way of the rear window was the odious and infinitely old Mr. Thompson.

(Worse than E. Nesbit's U. W. Ugli, let me assure you.) He seemed to appear out of nowhere, for I hadn't seen him when I was getting into the car. But there he was now, ogling the back of my head. This was quite normal for the lecherous old boy, and I didn't think anything of it. While I was adjusting the mirror, however, a strange little trick took place. I must have hit the switch that changes the position of the mirror for night driving, flipping it back and forth very quickly like the snap of a camera. So what I saw for an instant was a nighttime, negative version of Mr. Thompson as he stood there with his hands deep in his trousers pockets. What a horrendous

idea. The unappealingly lubricious Thompson on this side of reality is bad enough without tfnfr-Thompsons running around and harassing me for dates. (Thank goodness there's only one of everybody, I thought.) I didn't pull out of the driveway until I saw Thompson move on down the sidewalk, which he did after a few moments, leaving me to stare at my own shriveled eye sockets in the rearview mirror.

The sun was going down in a pumpkin-colored blaze when I arrived at the little one-story library. Some costumed kids were hanging around outside: a werewolf, a black cat with a long curling tail, and what looked like an Elvis Presley, or at least some teen idol of a bygone age. And coming up the walk were two identical Tinkerbells,

who I later found out were Tracy and Trina Martin. I had forgotten about twins.

So much for the comforting notion that there's only one of everybody.

I was actually feeling quite confident, even as I entered the library and suddenly found myself confronted with a huddling mass of youngsters. But then the spell was broken maliciously when some anonymous smart aleck called out from the crowd, saying: "Hey, lookit the mask she's wearing." After that I propelled myself down several glossy linoleum hallways in search of a friendly adult face.

(Someone should give that wisecracker a copy of Struwwe/peter; let him see what happens to his kind of kid.)

Finally I passed the open door of tidy little room where a group of ladies and the head librarian, Mr. Grosz, were sipping coffee. Mr. Grosz said how nice it was to see me again and introduced me to the moms who were helping out with the party.

"My William's read all your books," said a Mrs. Harley, as if she were relating a fact to which she was completely indifferent. "I can't keep him away from them."

I didn't know whether or not to thank her for this comment, and ended up replying with a dignified and slightly liquorish smile. Mr. Grosz offered me some coffee and I declined: bad for the stomach. Then he wickedly suggested that, as it was starting to get dark outside, the time seemed right for the festivities to begin. My reading was to inaugurate the evening's fun, a good spooky story "to get everyone in the mood." First, though, I needed to get myself in the mood, and discreetly retired to a nearby ladies' room where I could refortify my fluttering nerves. Mr. Grosz, in one of the strangest and most embarrassing social gestures I've ever witnessed, offered to wait right outside the lavatory until I finished.

"I'm quite ready now, Mr. Grosz," I said, glaring down at the little man from atop an unelderly pair of high heels. He cleared his throat, and I almost thought he was going to extend a crooked arm for me to take. But instead, he merely stretched it out, indicating the way to an old woman who might not see as well as she once did.

He led me back down the hallway toward the children's section of the library, where I assumed my reading would take place as it always had in the past.

However, we walked right by this area, which was dark and ominously empty, and proceeded down a flight of stairs leading to the library's basement. "Our new facility," bragged Mr. Grosz.

"Converted one of the storage rooms into a small auditorium of sorts." Down at the end of the hallway, two large green doors faced each other on opposite walls. "Which one will it be tonight?" asked Mr. Grosz while staring at my left hand. "Preston and the Starving Shadows," I answered, showing him the book I was holding. He smiled and confided that it was one of his favorites. Then he opened the door to the library's new facility.

Over fifty kids were sitting (quietly!) in their seats. At the front of the long, narrow room, a big witch was outlining the party activities for the night; and when she saw Mr. Grosz and me enter, she began telling the children about a "special treat for us all," meaning that the half-crocked lady author

was about to give her half-cocked oration. Walking a very straight line to the front, I took the platform and thanked everyone for that nice applause—most of it, in fact, coming from the sweaty hands of Mr. Grosz. On the platform was a lampbearing podium decorated with wizened cornstalks. I fixed my book in place before me, disguising my apprehension with a little stage patter about the story everyone was going to hear. When I invoked the name of Preston Penn, a few kids actually cheered, or at least one did. Just as I was ready to begin reading, however, the lights went out, which was rather unexpected. And for the first time I noticed that facing each other on opposite sides of the room were two rows of jacko'-lanterns shining bright orange and yellow in the darkness. They all had identical faces—triangular eyes and noses, wailing O's for mouths— and could have been mirror reflections of themselves. (As a child, I was convinced that pumpkins naturally grew this way, complete with facial features and phosphorescent insides.) Furthermore, they seemed to be suspended in space, darkness concealing their means of support. Since that darkness also prevented my seeing the faces of the children, these jack-o'-lanterns became my audience.

But as I read, the real audience asserted itself with giggles, whispers, and some rather ingenious noises made with the folding wooden chairs they were sitting in. At one point, toward the end of the reading, there came a low moan from somewhere in the back, and it sounded as if someone had fallen out of his seat. "It's all right," I heard an adult voice call out. The door at the back opened, allowing a moment of brightness to break the spooky spell, and some shadows exited. When the lights came on at the end of the story, one of the seats toward the back was missing its occupant.

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"Okay, kids," said the big witch after some minor applause for Preston, "everyone move their chairs back to the walls and make room for the games and stuff."

The games and stuff had the room in a low-grade uproar. Masked and costumed children ruled the night, indulging their appetite for movement, sweet things to eat and drink, and noise. I stood at the periphery of the commotion and chatted with Mr. Grosz.

“What exactly was the disturbance all about?” I asked him.

He took a sip from a plastic cup of cider and smacked his lips offensively. “Oh, nothing, really. You see that child there with the black-cat outfit? She seemed to have fainted. Not entirely, of course. Once we got her outside, she was all right. She was wearing her kitty mask all through your reading, and I think the poor thing hyperventilated or something like that. Complained that she saw something horrible in her mask and was very frightened for a while. At any rate, you can see she’s fine now, and she’s even wearing her mask again. Amazing how children can put things right out of their minds and recover so quickly.”

I agreed that it was amazing, and then asked precisely what it was the child thought she saw in her mask. I couldn’t help being reminded of another cat earlier in the day who also saw something that gave her a fright.

“She couldn’t really explain it,” replied Mr. Grosz. “You know how it is with children. Yes, I daresay you do know how it is with them, considering you’ve spent your life exploring the subject.”

I took credit for knowing how it is with children, knowing instead that Mr.

Grosz was really talking about someone else, about her. Not to overdo this quaint notion of a split between my professional and my private personas, but at the time I was already quite self-conscious about the matter. While I was reading the Preston book to the kids, I had suffered the uncanny experience of having almost no recognition of my own words. Of course, this is rather a cliche with writers, and it has happened to me many times throughout my long career.

But never so completely. They were the words of a mind (I stop just short of writing soul) entirely alien to me. This much I would like to note in passing, never to be mentioned again.

“I do hope,” I said to Mr. Grosz, “that it wasn’t the story that scared the child. I have enough angry parents on my hands as it is.”

“Oh, I’m sure it wasn’t. Not that it wasn’t a good scary children’s 77

story. I didn't mean to imply that, of course. But you know, it's that time of year. Imaginary things are supposed to seem more real. Like your Preston. He was always a big one for Hallowe'en, am I right?"

I said he was quite right and hoped he would not pursue the subject. The reality of fictional characters was not at all what I wanted to talk about just then. I tried to laugh it away. And you know, Father, for a moment it was exactly like your own laugh, and not my usual hereditary impersonation of it.

Much to everyone's regret, I did not stay very long at the party. The reading had largely sobered me up, and my tolerance level was running quite low. Yes, Mr. Grosz, I promise to do it again next year, anything you say; just let me get back to my car and my bar.

The drive home through the suburban streets was something of an ordeal, made hazardous by pedestrian trick-or-treaters. The costumes did me no good. (The same ghost was everywhere.) The masks did me no good. And those Prestonian shadows fluttering against two-story facades (why did I have to choose that book?) certainly did me no good at all. This was not my place anymore. Not my style. Dr. Guardsman, administer your medicine in tall glasses… but please not looking-ones.

And now I'm safe at home with one of the tallest of those glasses resting full and faithful on my desk as I write. A lamp with a shade of Tiffany glass (circa 1922) casts its amiable glow on the many pages I've filled over the past few hours. (Although the hands of the clock seem locked in the same V position as when I started writing.) The lamplight shines upon the window directly in front of my desk, allowing me to see a relatively flattering reflection of myself in the black mirror of the glass. The house is soundless, and I'm a rich, retired authoress-widow.

Is there still a problem? I'm really not sure.

I remind you that I've been drinking steadily since early this afternoon. I remind you that I'm old and no stranger to the mysteries of geriatric neuroticism. I remind you that some part of me has written a series of children's books whose hero is a disciple of the bizarre. I remind you of

what night this is and to what zone the imagination can fly on this particular eve.

(But we can discount this last one, owing to my status as an elderly cynic and disbeliever.) I need not, however, remind you that this world is stranger than we know, or

at least mine seems to be, especially this past year. And I now notice that it's very strange—and, once again, untidy.

Exhibit One. Outside my window is an autumn moon hanging in the blackness. Now, I have to confess that I'm not up on the lunar phases ("loony faces," as Preston might say), but there seems to have been a switch since I last peeked out the window—the thing looks reversed. Where it used to be concaving to the right, it's now comparing in that direction, last quarter changed to first quarter, or something of that nature. But I doubt Nature has anything to do with it; more likely the explanation lies with Memory. And there's really not much troubling me about the moon, which, even if reversed, would still look as neat as a storybook illustration. The trouble is with everything else below, or at least what I can see of the suburbanscape in the darkness. Like writing that can only be read in a mirror, the shapes outside my window—trees, houses, but thank goodness no people—now look awkward and wrong.

Exhibit Two. To the earlier list of reasons for my diminished competence, I would like to add an upcoming alcohol withdrawal. The last sip I took out of that glass on my desk tasted indescribably strange, to the point where I doubt I'll be having any more. I almost wrote, and now will, that the booze tasted inside out. Of course, there are certain diseases with the power to turn the flavor of one's favorite drink into that of a hellbroth. So perhaps I've fallen victim to such a malady. But I remind you that although my mind may be terminally soused, it has always resided in corpore sano.

Exhibit Three (the last). My reflection in the window before me. Perhaps something unusual in the melt of the glass. My face. The surrounding shadows seem to be overlapping it a little at a time, like bugs attracted to

something sweet. But the only thing sweet about Alice is her blood, highly sugared over the years from her drinking habit. So what is it, then? Shadows of senility? Or those starving things I read about earlier this evening come back for a repeat performance, another in a yearlong series of echoes? But whenever that happens, it's always the reflection, the warped or imaginary image first… and then the real-life echo. Since when does reading a story constitute an incantation calling up its imagery before the body's eyes and not the mind's?

Something's backward here. Backward into a corner: checkmate.

Now, perhaps this seems like merely another cry of wolf, the most 79

elaborate one so far. I can't actually say that it isn't. I can't say that what I'm hearing right now isn't some Hallowe'en trick of my besotted brain.

The laughing out in the hallway, I mean. That childish chuckling. Even when I concentrate, I'm still not able to tell if the sound is inside or outside my head. It's like looking at one of those toy pictures that yield two distinct scenes when tilted this way or that, but, at a certain angle, form only a merging blur of them both. Nonetheless, the laughing is there, somewhere. And the voice is extremely familiar. Of course, it is. No, it isn't. Yes, it is, it is!

Aaaaa ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.

Ex. 4 (the shadows again). They're all over my face in the window. Stripping away, as in the story. But there's nothing under that old mask; no child's face there, Preston. It's you, isn't it? I've never heard your laughter, except in my imagination, but that's exactly how I imagined it sounds. Or has my imagination given you, too, a hand-me-down, inherited laugh?

My only fear is that it isn't you but some impostor. The moon, the clock, the drink, the window. This is all very much your style, only it's not being done in fun, is it? It's not funny. Too horrible for me, Preston, or whoever you are.

And who is it? Who could be doing this to a harmless old lady? Too horrible. The shadows in the window. No, not my face.

I cant

see anymore Help me Father

cant see

Vastarien

Within the blackness of his sleep a few lights began to glow like candles in a cloistered cell. Their illumination was unsteady and dim, issuing from no definite source. Nonetheless, he now discovered many shapes beneath the shadows: tall buildings whose rooftops nodded groundward, wide buildings whose facades seemed to follow the curve of a street, dark buildings whose windows and doorways tilted like badly hung paintings. And even if he found himself unable to fix his own location in this scene, he knew where his dreams had delivered him once more.

Even as the warped structures multiplied in his vision, crowding the lost distance, he possessed a sense of intimacy with each of them, a peculiar knowledge of the spaces within them and of the streets which coiled themselves around their mass. Once again he knew the depths of their foundations, where an obscure life seemed to establish itself, a secret civilization of echoes flourishing among groaning walls. Yet upon his probing more extensively into such interiors, certain difficulties presented themselves: stairways that wandered off-course into useless places; caged elevators that urged unwanted stops on their passengers; thin ladders ascending into a maze of shafts and conduits, the dark valves and arteries of a petrified and monstrous organism.

And he knew that every corner of this corroded world was prolific with choices, even if they had to be made blindly in a place where clear consequences and a hierarchy of possibilities were lacking. For there might be a room whose shabby and soundless decor exudes a desolate serenity which at first attracts the visitor, who then discovers certain figures enveloped in plush furniture, figures that do not move or speak but only stare; and, concluding that these weary mannikins have

exercised a bizarre indulgence in repose, the visitor must ponder the alternatives: to linger or to leave?

Eluding the claustral enchantments of such rooms, his gaze now roamed the streets of this dream. He scanned the altitudes beyond the high sloping roofs: there the stars seemed to be no more than silvery cinders which showered up from the mouths of great chimneys and clung to something dark and dense looming above, something that closed in upon each black horizon. It appeared to him that certain high towers nearly breached this sagging blackness, stretching themselves nightward to attain the farthest possible remove from the world below. And toward the peak of one of the highest towers he spied vague silhouettes that moved hectically in a bright window, twisting and leaning upon the glass like shadow-puppets in the fever of some mad dispute.

Through the mazy streets his vision slowly glided, as if carried along by a sluggish draft. Darkened windows reflected the beams of stars and streetlamps; lighted windows, however dim their glow, betrayed strange scenes which were left behind long before their full mystery could overwhelm the dreaming traveller. He wandered into thoroughfares more remote, soaring past cluttered gardens and crooked gates, drifting alongside an expansive wall that seemed to border an abyss, and floating over bridges that arched above the black purling waters of canals.

Near a certain street corner, a place of supernatural clarity and stillness, he saw two figures standing beneath the crystalline glaze of a lamp ensconsed high upon a wall of carved stone. Their shadows were perfect columns of blackness upon the livid pavement; their faces were a pair of faded masks concealing profound schemes. And they seemed to have lives of their own, with no awareness of their dreaming observer, who wished only to live with these specters and know their dreams, to remain in this place where everything was transfixed in the order of the unreal.

Never again, it seemed, could he be forced to abandon this realm of beautiful shadows.

Victor Keirion awoke with a brief convulsion of his limbs, as if he had been chaotically scrambling to break his fall from an imaginary height. For a moment he held his eyes closed, hoping to preserve the dissipating euphoria of the dream. Finally he blinked once or twice.

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Moonlight through a curtainless window allowed him the image of his outstretched arms and his somewhat twisted hands. Releasing his awkward hold on the edge of the sheeted mattress, he rolled onto his back. Then he groped around until his fingers found the cord dangling from the light above the bed. A small, barely furnished room appeared.

He pushed himself up and reached toward the painted metal nightstand. Through the spaces between his fingers he saw the pale gray binding of a book and some of the dark letters tooled upon its cover: V, S, R, N. Suddenly he withdrew his hand without touching the book, for the magical intoxication of the dream had died, and he feared that he would not be able to revive it.

Freeing himself from the coarse bedcovers, he sat at the edge of the mattress, elbows resting on his legs and hands loosely folded. His hair and eyes were pale, his complexion rather grayish, suggesting the color of certain clouds or that of long confinement. The single window in the room was only a few steps away, but he kept himself from approaching it, from even glancing in its direction. He knew exactly what he would see at that time of night: tall buildings, wide buildings, dark buildings, a scattering of stars and lights, and some lethargic movement in the streets below.

In so many ways the city outside the window was a semblance of that other place, which now seemed impossibly far off and inaccessible. But the likeness was evident only to his inner vision, only in the recollected images he formed when his eyes were closed or out of focus. It would be difficult to conceive of a creature for whom this world—its bare form seen with open eyes—represented a coveted paradise.

Now standing before the window, his hands tearing into the pockets of a papery bathrobe, he saw that something was missing from the view, some crucial property that was denied to the stars above and the streets below, some unearthly essence needed to save them. The word unearthly reverberated in the room. In that place and at that hour, the paradoxical absence, the missing quality, became clear to him: it was the element of the unreal.

For Victor Keirion belonged to that wretched sect of souls who believe that the only value of this world lies in its power—at certain times—to suggest another world. Nevertheless, the place he now surveyed through the high window could never be anything but the

most gauzy phantom of that other place, nothing save a shadowy mimic of the anatomy of that great dream. And although there were indeed times when one might be deceived, isolated moments when a gift for disguise triumphs, the impersonation could never be perfect or lasting. No true challenge to the rich unreality of Vastarien, where every shape suggested a thousand others, every sound disseminated everlasting echoes, every word founded a world. No horror, no joy was the equal of the abysmally vibrant sensations known in this place that was elsewhere, this spellbinding retreat where all experiences were interwoven to compose fantastic textures of feeling, a fine and dark tracery of limitless patterns. For everything in the unreal points to the infinite, and everything in Vastarien was unreal, unbounded by the tangible lie of existing. Even its most humble aspects proclaimed this truth: what door, he wondered, in any other world could imply the abundant and strange possibilities that belonged to the entrancing doors in the dream?

Then, as he focused his eyes upon a distant part of the city, he recalled a particular door, one of the least suggestive objects he had ever confronted, intimating little of what lay beyond.

It was a rectangle of smudged glass within another rectangle of scuffed wood, a battered thing lodged within a brick wall at the bottom of a stairway leading down from a crumbling street. And it pushed easily inward, merely a delicate formality between the underground shop and the outside world. Inside was an open room vaguely circular in shape, unusual in seeming more like the lobby of an old hotel than a bookstore. The circumference of the room was composed of crowded bookshelves whose separate sections were joined to one another to create an irregular polygon of eleven sides, with a long desk standing where a twelfth would have been. Beyond the desk stood a few more bookshelves arranged in aisles, their monotonous length leading into shadows. At the furthest point from this end

of the shop, he began his circuit of the shelves, which appeared so promising in their array of old and ruddy bindings, like remnants of some fabulous autumn.

Very soon, however, the promise was betrayed and the mystique of the Librairie de Grimoires, in accord with his expectations, was stripped away to reveal, in his eyes, a side-show of charlatanry. For this disillusionment he had only himself to blame. Moreover, he could

barely articulate the nature of the discrepancy between what he had hoped to find and what he actually found in such places. Aside from this hope, there was little basis for his belief that there existed some other arcana, one of a different kind altogether from that proffered by the books before him, all of which were sodden with an obscene reality, falsely hermetic ventures which consisted of circling the same absurd landscape. The other worlds portrayed in these books inevitably served as annexes of this one; they were impostors of the authentic unreality which was the only realm of redemption, however gruesome it might appear. And it was this terminal landscape that he sought, not those rituals of the “way” that never arrives, heavens or hells that are mere pretexts for circumnavigating the real and revelling in it. For he dreamed of strange volumes that turned away from all earthly light to become lost in their own nightmares, pages that preached a nocturnal salvation, a liturgy of shadows, catechism of phantoms. His absolute: to dwell among the ruins of reality.

And it seemed to surpass all probability that there existed no precedent for this dream, no elaboration of this vision into a word, a delirious bible that would be the blight of all others—a scripture that would begin in apocalypse and lead its disciple to the wreck of all creation.

He had, in fact, come upon passages in certain books that approached this ideal, hinting to the reader—almost admonishing him—that the page before his eyes was about to offer a view from the abyss and cast a wavering light on desolate hallucinations. To become the wind in the dead of winter, so might begin an enticing verse of dreams. But soon the bemazed visionary would falter, retracting the promised scene of a shadow kingdom at the end

of all entity, perhaps offering an apologetics for this lapse into the unreal. The work would then once more take up the universal theme, disclosing its true purpose in belaboring the most futile and profane of all ambitions: power, with knowledge as its drudge. The vision of a disastrous enlightenment, of a catastrophic illumination, was conjured up in passing and then cast aside. What remained was invariably a metaphysics as systematically trivial and debased as the physical laws it purported to transcend, a manual outlining the path to some hypothetical state of absolute glory. What remained lost was the revelation that nothing ever known has ended in glory; that all which ends does so in exhaustion, in confusion, and debris.

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Nevertheless, a book that contained even a false gesture toward his truly eccentric absolute might indeed serve his purpose. Directing the attention of a bookseller to selected contents of such books, he would say: “I have an interest in a certain subject area, perhaps you will see … that is, I wonder, do you know of other, what should I say, sources that you would be able to recommend for my. …”

Occasionally he was referred to another bookseller or to the owner of a private collection. And ultimately he would be forced to realize that he had been grotesquely misunderstood when he found himself on the fringe of a society devoted to some strictly demonic enterprise.

The very bookshop in which he was now browsing represented only the most recent digression in a search without progress. But he had learned to be cautious and would try to waste as little time as possible in discovering if there was anything hidden for him here. Certainly not on the shelves which presently surrounded him.

“Have you seen our friend?” asked a nearby voice, startling him somewhat. Victor Keirion turned to face the stranger. The man was rather small and wore a black overcoat; his hair was also black and fell loosely across his forehead. Besides his general appearance, there was also something about his presence that made one think of a crow, a scavenging creature in wait.

“Has he come out of his hole?” the man asked, gesturing toward the empty desk and the dark area behind it.

“I’m sorry, I haven’t seen anyone,” Keirion replied. “I only now noticed you.”

“I can’t help being quiet. Look at these little feet,” the man said, pointing to a highly polished pair of black shoes. Without thinking, Keirion looked down; then, feeling duped, he looked up again at the smiling stranger.

“You look very bored,” said the human crow.

“I’m sorry?”

“Never mind. I can see that I’m bothering you.” Then the man walked away, his coat flapping slightly, and began browsing some distant bookshelves. “I’ve never seen you in here before,” he said from across the room.

“I’ve never been in here before,” Keirion answered.

“Have you ever read this?” the stranger asked, pulling down a book and holding up its wordless black cover.

“Never,” Keirion replied without so much as glancing at the book. Somehow this seemed the best action to take with this character, who appeared to be foreign in some indefinable way, intangibly alien.

“Well, you must be looking for something special,” continued the other man, replacing the black book on its shelf. “And I know what that’s like, when you’re looking for something very special. Have you ever heard of a book, an extremely special book, that is not… yes, that is not about something, but actually is that something?”

For the first time the obnoxious stranger had managed to intrigue Keirion rather than annoy him. “That sounds …,” he started to say, but then the other man exclaimed:

“There he is, there he is. Excuse me.”

It seemed that the proprietor—that mutual friend—had finally made his appearance and was now standing behind the desk, looking toward his two customers. “My friend,” said the crow-man as he stepped with outstretched hand over to the smoothly bald and softly fat gentleman. The two of them briefly shook hands; they whispered for a few moments. Then the crow-man was invited behind the desk, and—led by the heavy, unsmiling bookseller—made his way into the darkness at the back of the shop. In a distant corner of that darkness the brilliant rectangle of a doorway suddenly flashed into outline, admitting through its frame a large, two-headed shadow.

Left alone among the worthless volumes of that shop, Victor Keirion felt the sad frustration of the uninvited, the abandoned. More than ever he had become infected with hopes and curiosities of an indeterminable kind. And he soon found it impossible to remain outside that radiant little room the other two had entered, and on whose threshold he presently stood in silence.

The room was a cramped bibliographic cubicle within which stood another cubicle formed by free-standing bookcases, creating four very narrow aisleways in the space between them. From the doorway he could not see how the inner cubicle might be entered, but he heard the voices of the others whispering within.

Stepping quietly, he began making his way along the perimeter of the room, his eyes voraciously scanning a wealth of odd-looking volumes.

Immediately he sensed that something of a special nature awaited his discovery, and the evidence for this intuition began to build. Each book that he examined served as a clue in this delirious investigation, a cryptic sign which engaged his powers of interpretation and

imparted the faith to proceed. Many of the works were written in foreign languages he did not read; some appeared to be composed in ciphers based on familiar characters and others seemed to be transcribed in a wholly

artificial cryptography. But in everyone of these books he found an oblique guidance, some feature of more or less indirect significance: a strangeness in the typeface, pages and bindings of uncommon texture, abstract diagrams suggesting no orthodox ritual or occult system. Even greater anticipation was inspired by certain illustrated plates, mysterious drawings and engravings that depicted scenes and situations unlike anything he could name. And such works as Cynothoglys or The Noctuary of Tine conveyed schemes so bizarre, so remote from known texts and treatises of the esoteric tradition, that he felt assured of the sense of his quest.

The whispering grew louder, though no more distinct, as he edged around a corner of that inner cubicle and anxiously noted the opening at its far end. At the same time he was distracted, for no apparent reason, by a small grayish volume leaning within a gap between larger and more garish tomes. The little book had been set upon the highest shelf, making it necessary for him to stretch himself, as if on an upright torture rack, to reach it. Trying not to give away his presence by the sounds of his pain, he finally secured the ashen-colored object—as pale as his own coloring—between the tips of his first two fingers.

Mutely he strained to slide it quietly from its place; this act accomplished, he slowly shrunk down to his original stature and looked into the book's brittle pages.

It seemed to be a chronicle of strange dreams. Yet somehow the passages he examined were less a recollection of unruled visions than a tangible incarnation of them, not mere rhetoric but the thing itself. The use of language in the book was arrantly unnatural and the book's author unknown. Indeed, the text conveyed the impression of speaking for itself and speaking only to itself, the words flowing together like shadows that were cast by no forms outside the book. But although this volume appeared to be composed in a vernacular of mysteries, its words did inspire a sure understanding and created in their reader a visceral apprehension of the world they described, existing inseparable from it. Could this truly be the invocation of Vastarien, that improbable world to which those gnarled letters on the front of the book alluded? And was it a world at all?

Rather the unreal essence of one, all natural elements purged by an occult process

of extraction, all days distilled into dreams and nights into nightmares. Each passage he entered in the book both enchanted and appalled him with images and incidents so freakish and chaotic that his usual sense of these terms disintegrated along with everything else. Rampant oddity seemed to be the rule of the realm; imperfection became the source of the miraculous —wonders of deformity and marvels of miscreation. There was horror, undoubtedly. But it was a horror uncompromised by any feeling of lost joy or thwarted redemption; rather, it was a deliverance by damnation. And if Vastarien was a nightmare, it was a nightmare transformed in spirit by the utter absence of refuge: nightmare made normal.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t see that you had drifted in here,” said the bookseller in a high thin voice. He had just emerged from the inner chamber of the room and was standing with arms folded across his wide chest. “Please don’t touch anything.

And may I take that from you?” The right arm of the bookseller reached out, then returned to its former place when the man with the pale eyes did not relinquish the merchandise.

“I think I would like to purchase it,” said Keirion. “I’m sure I would, if. …”

“Of course, if the price is reasonable,” finished the bookseller. “But who knows, you might not be able to understand how valuable these books can be. That one …,” he said, removing a little pad and pencil from inside his jacket and scribbling briefly. He ripped off the top sheet and held it up for the would-be buyer to see, then confidently put away all writing materials, as if that would be the end of it.

“But there must be some latitude for bargaining,” Keirion protested.

“I’m afraid not,” answered the bookseller. “Not with something that is the only one of its kind, as are many of these volumes. Yet that one book you

are holding, that single copy. …”

A hand touched the bookseller’s shoulder and seemed to switch off his voice.

Then the crow-man stepped into the aisleway, his eyes fixed upon the object under discussion, and asked: “Don’t you find that the book is somewhat …

difficult?”

“Difficult,” repeated Keirion. “I’m not sure. … If you mean that the language is strange, I would have to agree, but—”

“No,” interjected the bookseller, “that’s not what he means at all.”

“Excuse us for a moment,” said the crow-man.

Then both men went back into the inner room, where they whispered for some time.

When the whispering ceased, the bookseller came forth and announced that there had been a mistake. The book, while something of a curiosity, was worth a good deal less than the price earlier quoted. The revised evaluation, while still costly, was nevertheless within the means of this particular buyer, who agreed at once to pay it.

Thus began Victor Keirion’s preoccupation with a certain book and a certain hallucinated world, though to make a distinction between these two phenomena ultimately seemed an error: the book, indeed, did not merely describe that strange world but, in some obscure fashion, was a true composition of the thing itself, its very form incarnate.

Each day thereafter he studied the hypnotic episodes of the little book; each night, as he dreamed, he carried out shapeless expeditions into its fantastic topography. To all appearances it seemed he had discovered the summit or abyss of the unreal, that paradise of exhaustion, confusion, and debris where reality ends and where one may dwell among its ruins. And it was

not long before he found it necessary to revisit that twelve-sided shop, intending to question the obese bookseller on the subject of the book and unintentionally learning the truth of how it came to be sold.

When he arrived at the bookstore, sometime in the middle of a grayish afternoon, Victor Keirion was surprised to find that the door, which had opened so freely on his previous visit, was now firmly locked. It would not even rattle in its frame when he nervously pushed and pulled on the handle. Since the interior of the store was lighted, he took a coin from his pocket and began tapping on the glass. Finally, someone came forward from the shadows of the back room.

“Closed,” the bookseller pantomimed on the other side of the glass.

“But. …” Keirion argued, pointing to his wristwatch.

“Nevertheless,” the wide man shouted. Then, after scrutinizing the disappointed patron, the bookseller unlocked the door and opened it far enough to carry on a brief conversation. “And what is it I can do for you. I’m closed, so you’ll have to come some other time if—”

“I only wanted to ask you something. Do you remember the book that I bought from you not long ago, the one—”

“Yes, I remember,” replied the bookseller, as if quite prepared for the question. “And let me say that I was quite impressed, as of course was … the other man.”

“Impressed?” Keirion repeated.

“Flabbergasted is more the word in his case,” continued the bookseller. “He said to me, ‘The book has found its reader,’ and what could I do but agree with him?”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” said Keirion.

The bookseller blinked and said nothing. After a few moments he reluctantly explained: “I was hoping that by now you would understand. He hasn’t contacted you? The man who was in here that day?”

“No, why should he?”

The bookseller blinked again and said: “Well, I suppose there’s no reason you need to stand out there. It’s getting very cold, don’t you feel it?” Then he closed the door and pulled Keirion a little to one side of it, whispering: “There’s just one thing I would like to tell you. I made no mistake that day about the price of that book. And it was the price—in full—which was paid by the other man, don’t ask me anything else about him. That price, of course, minus the small amount that you yourself contributed. I didn’t cheat anyone, least of all him. He would have been happy to pay even more to get that book into your hands. And although I’m not exactly sure of his reasons, I think you should know that.”

“But why didn’t he simply purchase the book for himself?” asked Keirion.

The bookseller seemed confused. “It was of no use to him. Perhaps it would have been better if you hadn’t given yourself away when he asked you about the book.

How much you knew.”

“But I don’t know anything, apart from what I’ve read in the book itself. I came here to find—”

“—Nothing, I’m afraid. You’re the one who should be telling me, very impressive. But I’m not asking, don’t misunderstand. And there’s nothing more I can tell you, since I’ve already violated every precept of discretion. This is such an exceptional case, though. Very impressive, if in fact you are the reader of that book.”

Realizing that, at best, he had been led into a dialogue of mystification, and possibly one of lies, Victor Keirion had no regrets when the bookseller held the door open for him to leave.

But before very many days, and especially nights, had passed he 91

learned why the bookseller had been so impressed with him, and why the crowlike stranger had been so generous: the bestower of the book who was blind to its mysteries. In the course of those days, those nights, he learned that the stranger had given only so that he might possess the thing he could gain in no other way, that he was reading the book with borrowed eyes and stealing its secrets from the soul of its rightful reader. At last it became clear what was happening to him throughout those strange nights of dreaming.

On each of those nights the shapes of Vastarien slowly pushed through the obscurity of his sleep, avast landscape emerging from its own profound slumber and drifting forth from a place without name or dimension. And as the crooked monuments became manifest once again, they seemed to expand and soar high above him, drawing his vision toward them. Progressively the scene acquired nuance and articulation; steadily the creation became dense and intricate within its black womb: the streets were sinuous entrails winding through that dark body, and each edifice was the jutting bone of a skeleton hung with a thin musculature of shadows.

But just as his vision reached out to embrace fully the mysterious and jagged form of the dream, it all appeared to pull away, abandoning him on the edge of a dreamless void. The landscape was receding, shrinking into the distance. Now all he could see was a single street bordered by two converging rows of buildings.

And at the opposite end of that street, rising up taller than the buildings themselves, stood agreat figure in silhouette. This looming colossus made no movement or sound but firmly dominated the horizon where the single remaining street seemed to end. From this position the towering shadow was absorbing all other shapes into its own, which gradually was gaining in stature as the landscape withdrew and diminished. And the outline of this titanic figure appeared to be that of a man, yet it was also that of a dark and devouring bird.

Although for several nights Victor Keirion managed to awake before the scavenger had thoroughly consumed what was not its own, there was no assurance that he would always be able to do so and that the dream would

not pass into the hands of another. Ultimately, he conceived and executed the act that was necessary to keep possession of the dream he had coveted for so long.

Vastarien, he whispered as he stood in the shadows and moonlight 92

of that bare little room, where a massive metal door prevented his escape.

Within that door a small square of thick glass was implanted so that he might be watched by day and by night. And there was an unbending web of heavy wire covering the window which overlooked the city that was not Vastarien. Never, chanted a voice which might have been his own. Then more insistently: never, never, never. …

When the door was opened and some men in uniforms entered the room, they found Victor Keirion screaming to the raucous limits of his voice and trying to scale the thick metal mesh veiling the window, as if he were dragging himself along some unlikely route of liberation. Of course, they pulled him to the floor; they stretched him out upon the bed, where his wrists and ankles were tightly strapped. Then through the doorway strode a nurse who carried a slender syringe crowned with a silvery needle.

During the injection he continued to scream words which everyone in the room had heard before, each outburst developing the theme of his unjust confinement: how the man he had murdered was using him in a horrible way, a way impossible to explain or make credible. The man could not read the book—there, that book—and was stealing the dreams which the book had spawned. Stealing my dreams, he mumbled softly as the drug began to take effect. Stealing my. …

The group remained around the bed for a few moments, silently staring at its restrained occupant. Then one of them pointed to the book and initiated a conversation now familiar to them all.

“What should we do with it? It’s been taken away enough times already, but then there’s always another that appears.”

“And there’s no point to it. Look at these pages—nothing, nothing written anywhere.”

“So why does he sit reading them for hours? He does nothing else.”

“I think it’s time we told someone in authority.”

“Of course, we could do that, but what exactly would we say? That a certain inmate should be forbidden from reading a certain book? That he becomes violent?”

“And then they’ll ask why we can’t keep the book away from him or him from the book? What should we say to that?”

“There would be nothing we could say. Can you imagine what lunatics we would seem? As soon as we opened our mouths, that would be it for all of us.”

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“And when someone asks what the book means to him, or even what its name is …

what would be our answer?”

As if in response to this question, a few shapeless groans arose from the criminally insane creature who was bound to the bed. But no one could understand the meaning of the word or words that he uttered, least of all himself. For he was now far from his own words, buried deep within the dreams of a place where everything was transfixed in the order of the unreal; and whence, it truly seemed, he would never return.

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The Shadow At the Bottom of the World

Dr. Locrian's Asylum

Years passed and no one in our town, no one I could name, allotted a single word to that great ruin which marred the evenness of the horizon. Nor was mention made of that darkly gated patch of ground closer to the town's edge. Even in days more remote, few things were said about these sites. Perhaps someone would propose tearing down the old asylum and razing the burial-ground where no inmate had been interred for a generation or more; and perhaps a few others, swept along by the moment, would nod their heart's assent. But the resolution always remained poorly formed, very soon losing its shape entirely, its impetus dying a gentle death in the gentle old streets of our town.

Then how can I explain that sudden turn of events, that overnight conversion which set our steps toward that hulking and decayed edifice, trampling its graveyard along the way? In answer, I propose the existence of a secret movement, one conducted in the souls of the town's citizens, and in their dreams. Conceived thus, the mysterious conversion loses some of its mystery: one need only accept that we were all haunted by the same revenant, that certain images began to establish themselves deep within each of us and became part of our hidden lives. Finally, we resolved that we could no longer live as we had been.

When the idea of positive action first arose, the residents of the humble west end of town were the most zealous and impatient. For it was they who had suffered the severest unease, living as they did in close view of the wild plots and crooked headstones of that crowded strip of earth where mad minds had come to be shut away for eternity. But we all shared the burden of the crumbling asylum itself, which seemed to be visible from every corner of town—from the high rooms

of the old hotel, from the quiet rooms of our houses, from streets obscured by morning mist or twilight haze, and from my own shop whenever I looked out its front window. The setting sun would always be half-hidden by that massive silhouette, that huge broken headstone of some unspeakable grave. But more disturbing than our own view of the asylum was the idiotic gaze that it seemed to cast back at us, and through the years certain shamefully superstitious persons actually claimed to have seen mad-eyed and immobile figures staring out from the asylum's windows on nights when the moon shone with unusual brightness and the dark sky above the town appeared to contain more than its usual share of stars. Although few people spoke of such experiences, almost everyone had seen other sights at the asylum that no one could deny. And what strange things were brought to mind because of them; all over town vague scenes were inwardly envisioned.

As children, most of us had paid a visit at some time to that forbidden place, and later we carried with us memories of our somber adventures. Over the years we came to compare what we experienced, compiling this knowledge of the asylum until it became unseemly to augment it further.

By all accounts that old institution was a chamber of horrors, if not in its entirety then at least in certain isolated corners. It was not simply that a particular room attracted notice for its atmosphere of desolation: the gray walls pocked like sponges, the floor filthied by the years entering freely through broken windows, and the shallow bed withered after supporting so many nights of futile tears and screaming. There was something more.

Perhaps one of the walls to such a room would have built into it a sliding panel, a long rectangular slot near the ceiling. And on the other side would be another room, an unfurnished room which seemed never to have been occupied. But leaning against one wall of this other room, directly below the sliding panel, would be some long wooden sticks; and mounted at the ends of these sticks would be horrible little puppets.

Another room might be completely bare, yet its walls would be covered with pale fragments of weird funereal scenes. By removing some loose floorboards at the center of the room, one would discover several feet of earth piled upon an old, empty coffin. And then there was a very special room, a room I had visited myself, that was located

on the uppermost floor of the asylum and contained a great windowless skylight.

Positioned under that opening upon the heavens, and fixed securely in place, stood a long table with huge straps hanging from its sides.

There may have been other rooms of a strange type which memory has forbidden to me. But somehow none of them was singled out for comment during the actual dismantling of the asylum, when most of us were busy heaving the debris of years through great breaches we had made in the asylum’s outer walls, while some distance away the rest of the town witnessed the wrecking in a cautious state of silence. Among this group was

Mr. Harkness Locrian, a thin and large-eyed old gentleman whose silence was not like that of the others.

Perhaps we expected Mr. Locrian to voice opposition to our project, but he did not do so at any stage of the destruction. Although no one, to my knowledge, suspected him of preserving any morbid sentiment for the old asylum, it was difficult to forget that his grandfather had been the director of the Shire County Sanitarium during its declining years and that his father had closed down the place under circumstances that remained an obscure episode in the town's history. If we spoke very little about the asylum and its graveyard, Mr. Locrian spoke of them not at all. This reticence, no doubt, served only to strengthen in our minds the intangible bond which seemed to exist between him and the awful ruin that sealed the horizon. Even I, who knew the old man better than anyone else in the town, regarded him with a degree of circumspection. Outwardly, of course, I was courteous to him, even friendly; he was, after all, the oldest and most reliable patron of my business. And not long after the demolition of the asylum was concluded, and the last of its former residents' remains had been exhumed and hastily cremated, Mr. Locrian paid me a visit.

At the very moment he entered the shop, I was examining some books which had just arrived for him by special order. But even if I had grown jaded to such coincidences following years of dealing in books, which have some peculiarity about them that breeds events of this nature, there was something unpleasant about this particular freak of timing.

"Afternoon," I greeted. "You know, I was just looking over …"

"I see," he said, approaching the counter where tiers of books left very little open space. As he glanced at these new arrivals—hardly 97

interested, it seemed—he slowly unbuttoned his overcoat, a bulky thing which made his head appear somewhat small for his body. How easily I can envision him on that day. And even now his voice sounds clear in my memory, a voice that was far too quiet for the old man's harshly brilliant eyes. After a few moments he turned and casually began to wander about the shop, as if seeking out observers who might be secluded among its stacks. He rounded a corner and momentarily left my view. "So at last it's done," he said. "Something of a feat, a striking page of local history."

"I suppose it is," I answered, watching as Mr. Locrian traversed the rear aisle of the shop, appearing and disappearing as he passed by several rows of shelves.

"Without doubt it is," he replied, proceeding straight down the aisle in front of me. Finally reaching the counter behind which I stood, he placed his hands upon it, leaned forward, and asked: "But what has been achieved, what has really changed?"

The tone of voice in which he posed this question was both sardonic and morose, carrying undesirable connotations that echoed in all the remote places where truth had been shut up and abandoned like a howling imbecile. Nonetheless, I held to the lie.

"If you mean that there's very little difference now, I would have to agree.

Only the removal of an eyesore. That was all we intended to do. Simply that."

Then I tried to draw his attention to the books that had arrived for him, but I was coldly interrupted when he said: “We must be walking different streets, Mr.

Crane, and seeing quite different faces, hearing different voices in this town.

Tell me,” he asked, suddenly animated, “did you ever hear those stories about the sanitarium? What some people saw in its windows? Perhaps you yourself were one of them.”

I said nothing, which he might have accepted as a confirmation that I was one of those people. He continued:

“And isn’t there much the same feeling now, in this town, as there was in those stories? Can you admit that the days and nights are much worse now than they were… before? Of course, you may tell me that it’s just the moodiness of the season, the chill, the dour afternoons you observe through your shop window. On my way here, I actually heard some people saying such things. They also said other things which

they didn’t think I could hear. Somehow everyone seems to know about these books of mine, Mr. Crane.”

He did not look at me while delivering this last remark, but began to pace slowly from one end of the counter to the other, then back again.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Locrian, if you feel that I’ve violated some confidence. I never imagined that it would make any difference.”

He paused in his pacing and now gazed at me with an expression of almost paternal forgiveness.

“Of course,” he said in his earlier, quiet voice. “But things are very different now, will you allow that?”

“… Yes,” I conceded.

“But no one is sure exactly in what way they are different.”

“No,” I agreed.

“Did you know that my grandfather, Doctor Harkness Locrian, was buried in that graveyard?”

Feeling a sudden surprise and embarrassment, I replied: “I’m sure if you had said something.” But it was as if I were the one who had said nothing at all, nothing that would deter him from what he had come to tell me.

“Is this safe to sit in?” he asked, pointing to an old chair by the front window. And beyond the window, unobstructed, the pale autumn sun was sinking down.

“Yes, help yourself,” I said, noticing some passersby who had noticed Mr.

Locrian and looked oddly at him.

“My grandfather,” Mr. Locrian continued, “felt at home with his lunatics. You maybe startled to hear such a thing. Although the house that is now mine was once his, he did not spend his time there, not even to sleep. It was only after they closed down the sanitarium that he actually became a resident of his own home, which was also the home of myself and my parents, who now had charge of the old man. Of course, you probably don’t remember. …

“My grandfather passed his final years in a small upstairs room overlooking the outskirts of town, and I recall seeing him day after day gazing through his window at the sanitarium. …”

“I had no idea,” I interjected. “That seems rather—”

“Please, before you are led to think that his was merely a sentimental attachment, however perverse, let me say that it was no such thing. His feelings with respect to the sanitarium were in fact quite 99

incredible, owing to the manner in which he had used his authority at that place. I found out about this when I was still very young, but not so young that I could not understand the profound conflict that existed between my father and grandfather. I disregarded my parents’ admonitions that I not spend too much time with the old man, succumbing to the mystery of his presence. And one afternoon he revealed himself.

“He was gazing through the window and never once turned to face me. But after we had sat in silence for some time, he started to whisper something. ‘They questioned,’ he said. ‘They accused. They complained that no one in that place ever became well.’ Then he smiled and began to elaborate. ‘What things had they seen,’ he hissed, ‘to give them such … wisdom? They did not look into the faces,’ no, he did not say ‘faces’ but ‘eyes.’ Yes, he said,’… did not look into the eyes of those beings, the eyes that reflected the lifeless beauty of the silent, staring universe itself.’

“Those were his words. And then he talked about the voices of the patients under his care. He whispered, and I quote, that ‘the wonderful music of those voices spoke the supreme delirium of the planets as they go round and round like bright puppets dancing in the blackness.’ In the wandering words of those lunatics, he told me, the ancient mysteries were restored.

“Like all true mysteriarchs,” Mr. Locrian went on, “my grandfather desired a knowledge that was unspoken and unspeakable. And every volume of the strange library he left to his heirs attests to this desire. As you know, I have added to this collection in my own way, as did my father. But our reasons

were not those of the old doctor. At his sanitarium, Dr. Locrian had done something very strange, something that perhaps only he possessed both the knowledge and the impulse to do. It was not until many years later that my father attempted to explain everything to me, as I now am attempting to explain it to you.

“I have said that my grandfather was and always had been a mysteriarch, never a philanthropist of the mind, not a restorer of wounded psyches. In no way did he take a therapeutic approach with the inmates at the sanitarium. He did not view them as souls that were possessed, either by demons or by their own painful histories, but as beings who held a strange alliance with other orders of existence, who contained within themselves a particle of something eternal, a golden

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speck of magic which he thought might be enlarged. Thus, his ambition led him not to relieve his patients’ madness, but to exasperate it—to let it breathe with a life of its own. And this he did in certain ways that wholly eradicated what human qualities remained in these people. But sometimes that peculiar magic he saw in their eyes would seem to fade, and then he would institute his ‘proper treatment,’ which consisted of putting them through a battery of hellish ordeals intended to loosen their attachment to the world of humanity and to project them further into the absolute, the realm of the ‘silent, staring universe’ where the ultimate insanity of the infinite void might work a rather paradoxical cure. The result was something as pathetic as a puppet and as magnificent as the stars, something at once dead and never dying, a thing utterly without destiny and thus

imperishable, possessing that abysmal absence of mind, that infinite vacuity which is the essence of all that is immortal. And somehow, in his last days, my grandfather used this same procedure on himself, reaching into spaces beyond death.

“I know this to be true, because one night late in my childhood, I awoke and witnessed the proof. Leaving my bed, I walked down the moonlit hallway, feeling irresistibly drawn toward the closed door of my grandfather’s room. Stopping in front of that door, I turned its cold handle and slowly pushed back its strange nocturnal mass. Peeking timidly into the room, I saw my grandfather sitting before the window in the bright moonlight. My curiosity must have overcome my horror, for I actually spoke to this specter. ‘What are you doing here, Grandfather?’ I asked. And without turning away from the window, he slowly and tonelessly replied: ‘We are doing just what you see.’ Of course, what I saw was an old man who belonged in his grave, but who was now staring out his window across to the windows at the sanitarium, where others who were not human stared back.

“When I fearfully alerted my parents to what I had seen, I was surprised that my father responded not with disbelief but with anger: I had disobeyed his warnings about my grandfather’s room. Then he revealed the truth just as I now reveal it to you, and year after year he reiterated and expanded upon this secret learning: why that room must always be kept shut and why the sanitarium must never be disturbed. You may not be aware that an earlier effort to destroy the sanitarium was aborted through my father’s intervention. He was far more attached than I could ever be to this town, which ceased to have 101

a future long ago. How long has it been since a new building was added to all the old ones? This place would have crumbled in time. The natural course of things would have dismantled it, just as the asylum would have disappeared had it been left alone. But when all of you took up those

implements and marched toward the old ruin, I felt no desire to interfere. You have brought it on yourselves," he complacently ended.

"And what is it we have done?" I asked in a cold voice, now suppressing a mysterious outrage.

"You are only trying to preserve what remains of your mind's peace. You know that something is very wrong in this town, that you should never have done what you did, but still you cannot draw any conclusion from what I have told you."

"With all respect, Mr. Locrian, how can you imagine that I believe anything you've told me?"

He laughed weakly. "Actually, I don't. As you say, how could I? Without being somewhat mad, that is. But in time you will. And then I will tell you more things, things you will not be able to keep yourself from believing."

As he pushed himself up from the chair by the window, I asked: "Why tell me anything? Why did you come here today?"

"Why? Because I thought that perhaps my books had arrived, let me just take them like that. And also because everything is finished now. The others," he shrugged, "… hopeless. You are the only one who could understand. Not now, but in time."

And now I do understand what the old man told me as I never could on that autumn day some forty years ago.

It was toward the end of that same sullen day, in the course of a bleak twilight, that they began to appear. Like figures quietly emerging from the depths of memory, they struggled in the shadows and slowly became visible. But even if the transition had been subtle, insidiously graduated, it did not long go unnoticed. By nightfall they were distractingly conspicuous throughout the town, always framed in some high window of the structures they occupied: the rooms above the shops in the heart of the town, the highest story of the old hotel, the empty towers of civic buildings, the lofty turrets and grand gables of the most distinguished houses, and the attics of the humblest homes.

Their forms were as softly luminous as the autumn constellations 102

in the black sky above, their faces glowing with the same fixed expression of placid vacuity. And the attire of these apparitions was grotesquely suited to their surroundings. Buried many years before in antiquated clothes of a formal and funereal cut, they seemed to belong to the dying town in a manner its living members could not emulate. For the streets of the town now lost what life was left in them and became the dark corridors of a museum where these waxen nightmares had been put on exhibition.

In daylight, when the figures in the windows took on a dull wooden appearance that seemed less maddening, some of us ventured into those high rooms. But nothing was ever found on the other side of their windows, nothing save a tenantless room which no light would illuminate and which sooner or later inspired any living occupant with a demented dread. By night, when it seemed we could hear them erratically tapping on the floors

above us, their presence in our homes drove us out into the streets. Day and night we became sleepless vagrants, strangers in our own town. Eventually we may have ceased to recognize one another. But one name, one face was still known to all—that of Mr. Harkness Locrian, whose gaze haunted each one of us.

It was undoubtedly in his house that the fire began which mindlessly consumed every corner of the town. There were attempts made to oppose its path, but they were half-hearted and soon abandoned. For the most part we stood in silence, vacantly staring as the flames burned their way up to the high windows where spectral figures posed like portraits in their frames.

Ultimately these demons were exorcized, their windows left empty. But only after the town had been annulled by the holocaust.

Nothing more than charred wreckage remained. Afterward it was reported that one of our citizens had been taken by the fire, though none of us inquired into the exact circumstances under which old Mr. Locrian met his death.

There was, of course, no effort made to recover the town we had lost: when the first snow fell that year, it fell upon ruins grown cold and dreadful. But now, after the passing of so many years, it is not the ashen rubble of that town which haunts each of my hours; it is that one great ruin in whose shadow my mind has been interned.

And if they have kept me in this room because I speak to faces that appear at my window, then let them protect this same room from 103

violations after I am gone. For Mr. Locrian has been true to his promise; he has told me of certain things when I was ready to hear them. And he has other things to tell me, secrets surpassing all insanity. Commending me to an absolute cure, he will have immured another soul within the black and boundless walls of that eternal asylum where stars dance forever like bright puppets in the silent, staring void.

The Mystics of Muelenburg

If things are not what they seem—and we are forever reminded that this is the case—then it must also be observed that enough of us ignore this truth to keep the world from collapsing. Though never exact, always shifting somewhat, the proportion is crucial. For a certain number of minds are fated to depart for realms of delusion, as if in accordance with some hideous timetable, and many will never be returning to us. Even among those who remain, how difficult it can be to hold the focus sharp, to keep the picture of the world from fading, from blurring in selected zones and, on occasion, from sustaining epic deformations over the entire visible scene.

I once knew a man who claimed that, overnight, all the solid shapes of existence had been replaced by cheap substitutes: trees made of flimsy posterboard, houses built of colored foam, whole landscapes composed of hair-clippings. His own flesh, he said, was now just so much putty. Needless to add, this acquaintance had deserted the cause of appearances and could no longer be depended on to stick to the common story. Alone he had wandered into a tale of another sort altogether; for him, all things now participated in this nightmare of nonsense.

But although his revelations conflicted with the lesser forms of truth, nonetheless he did live in the light of a greater truth: that all is unreal.

Within him this knowledge was vividly present down to his very bones, which had been newly simulated by a compound of mud and dust and ashes.

In my own case, I must confess that the myth of a natural universe—that is, one that adheres to certain continuities whether we wish them or not—was losing its grip on me and was gradually being supplanted by a hallucinatory view of creation. Forms, having nothing to offer except a mere suggestion of firmness, declined in importance;

fantasy, that misty domain of pure meaning, gained in power and influence. This was in the days when esoteric wisdom seemed to count for something in my mind, and I would willingly have sacrificed a great deal in its pursuit. Hence, my interest in the man who called himself Klaus Klingman; hence, too, that brief yet profitable association between us, which came about through channels too twisted to recall.

Without a doubt, Klingman was one of the illuminati and proved this many times over in various psychic experiments, particularly those of the seance type. For those outside scientific circles, I need only mention the man who was severally known as Nemo the Necromancer, Marlowe the Magus, and Master Marinetti, each of whom was none other than Klaus Klingman himself. But Klingman's highest achievement was not a matter of public spectacle and consisted entirely of this private triumph: that he had attained, by laborious effort, an unwavering acceptance of the spectral nature of things, which to him were neither what they seemed to be nor were they quite anything at all.

Klingman lived in the enormous upper story of a warehouse that had been part of his family's legacy to him, and there I often found him wandering amidst a few pieces of furniture and the cavernous wasteland of dim and empty storage space.

Collapsing into an ancient armchair, reposing far beneath crumbling rafters, he would gaze beyond the physical body of his visitor, his eyes surveying remote worlds and his facial expression badly disorganized by dreams and large quantities of alcohol. "Fluidity, always fluidity," he shouted out, his voice carrying through the expansive haze around us, which muted daylight into dusk.

The embodiment of his mystic precepts, he appeared at any given moment to be on the verge of an amazing disintegration, his particular complex of atoms ready to go shooting off into the great void like a burst of fireworks.

We discussed the dangers—for me and for the world—of adopting a visionary program of existence. "The chemistry of things is so delicate," he warned. "And this word chemistry, what does it mean but a mingling, a mixing, a gushing together? Things that people fear." Indeed, I had already

suspected the hazards of his company, and, as the sun was setting over the city beyond the great windows of the warehouse, I became afraid. With an uncanny perception of my feelings, Klingman pointed at me and bellowed:
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“The worst fear of the race—yes, the world suddenly transformed into a senseless nightmare, horrible dissolution of things. Nothing compares, even oblivion is a sweet dream. You understand why, of course. Why this peculiar threat. These brooding psyches, all the busy minds everywhere. I hear them buzzing like flies in the blackness. I see them as glowworms flitting in the blackness. They are struggling, straining every second to keep the sky above them, to keep the sun in the sky, to keep the dead in the earth —to keep all things, so to speak, where they belong. What an undertaking! What a crushing task! Is it any wonder that they are all tempted by a universal vice, that in some dark street of the mind a single voice whispers to one and all, softly hissing, and says: ‘Lay down your burden.’ Then thoughts begin to drift, a mystical magnetism pulls them this way and that, faces start to change, shadows speak … sooner or later the sky comes down, melting like wax. But as you know, everything has not yet been lost: absolute terror has proved its security against this fate. Is it any wonder that these beings carry on the struggle at whatever cost?”

“And you?” I asked.

“I?”

“Yes, don’t you shoulder the universe in your own way?”

“Not at all,” he replied, smiling and sitting up in his chair as on a throne. “I am a lucky one, parasite of chaos, maggot of vice. Where I live is nightmare, thus a certain nonchalance. In a previous life, you know, I may actually have been at Muelenburg before it was lost in the delirium of history. Who can say?

Smothered by centuries now. But there was an opportunity, a moment of distraction in which so much was nearly lost forever, so many lost in that medieval gloom, catastrophe of dreams. How their minds wandered in the shadows even as their bodies were seemingly bound to narrow rutted streets

and apparently safeguarded by the spired cathedral which was erected between 1365

and 1399. A rare and fortuitous juncture when the burden of the heavens was heaviest—so much to keep in its place— and the psyche so ill-developed, so easily taxed and tempted away from its labors. But they knew nothing about that, and never could. They only knew the prospect of absolute terror."

"In Muelenburg," I said, hoping to draw his conversation outward before it twisted further into itself. "You said the cathedral."

"I see the cathedral, the colossal vault above, the central aisle stretching out before us. The woodcarvings leer down from dark 107

corners, animals and freaks, men in the mouths of demons. Are you taking notes again? Fine, then take notes. Who knows what you will remember of all this? Or will memory help you at all? In any case we are already there, sitting among the smothered sounds of the cathedral. Beyond the jeweled windows is the town in twilight."

Twilight, as Klingman explained and I must paraphrase, had come upon Muelenburg somewhat prematurely on a certain day deep into the autumn season. Early that afternoon, clouds had spread themselves evenly above the region surrounding the town, withholding heaven's light and giving a dull appearance to the landscape of forests, thatched farmhouses, and windmills standing still against the horizon. Within the high stone walls of Muelenburg itself, no one seemed particularly troubled that the narrow streets—normally so cluttered with the pointed shadows of peaked roofs and jutting gables at this time of day—were still immersed in a lukewarm dimness which turned merchants' brightly colored signs into faded artifacts of a dead town and which made faces look as if they were fashioned in pale clay. And in the central square—where the shadow from the clock-tower of the town hall at times overlapped those cast by the twin spires of the cathedral on the one hand, or the ones from high castle turrets looming at the border of the town on the other—there was only grayness undisturbed.

Where were the minds of the townspeople? How had they ceased paying homage to the ancient order of things? And when had the severing taken place that sent their world drifting on strange waters?

For some time they remained innocent of the disaster, going about their ways as the ashen twilight lingered far too long, as it encroached upon the hours that belonged to evening and suspended the town between day and night. Everywhere windows began to glow with the yellow light of lamps, creating the illusion that darkness was imminent. Any moment, it seemed, the natural cycle would relieve the town of the prolonged dusk it had suffered that autumn day. How well-received the blackness would have been by those who waited silently in sumptuous chambers or humble rooms, for no one could bear the sight of Muelenburg's twisting streets in that eerie, overstaying twilight. Even the nightwatchman shirked his nocturnal routine. And when the bells of the abbey sounded for the monks' midnight

prayers, each toll spread like an alarm throughout the town still held in the strange luminousness of the gloaming.

Exhausted by fear, many shuttered their windows, extinguished lamps, and retired to their beds, hoping that all would be made right in the interval. Others sat up with a candle, enjoying the lost luxury of shadows. A few, who were not fixed to the life of the town, broke through the unwatched gate and took to the roads, all the while gazing at the pale sky and wondering where they would go.

But whether they kept the hours in their dreams or in sleepless vigils, all were disturbed by something in the spaces around them, as if some strangeness had seeped into the atmosphere of their town, their homes, and perhaps their souls.

The air seemed heavier somehow, resisting them slightly, and also seemed to be flowing with things that could not be perceived except as swift, shadowlike movement escaping all sensible recognition, transparent flight which barely caressed one's vision.

When the clock high in the tower of the town hall proved that a nightful of hours had passed, some opened their shutters, even ventured into the streets.

But the sky still hovered over them like an infinite vault of glowing dust. Here and there throughout the town the people began to gather in whispering groups.

Appeals were soon made at the castle and the cathedral, and speculations were offered to calm the crowd. There was a struggle in heaven, some had reasoned, which had influenced the gross reality of the visible world. Others proposed a deception by demons or an ingenious punishment from on high. A few, who met secretly in well-hidden chambers, spoke in stricken voices of old deities formerly driven from the earth who were nowmonstrously groping their way back.

And all of these explications of the mystery were true in their own way, though none could abate the dread which had settled upon the town of Muelenburg.

Submerged in unvarying grayness, distracted and confused by phantasmal intrusions about them, the people of the town felt their world dissolving. Even the clock in the town hall tower failed to keep their moments from wandering strangely. Within such disorder were bred curious thoughts and actions. Thus, in the garden of the abbey an ancient tree was shunned and rumours spread concerning some change in its twisted silhouette, something flaccid and ropelike about its branches, until finally the monks dowsed it with oil and set it aflame, their circle of squinting faces bathing in the glare. Likewise, 109

a fountain standing in one of the castle's most secluded courtyards became notorious when its waters appeared to suggest fabulous depths far beyond the natural dimensions of its shell-shaped basin. The cathedral itself had deteriorated into a hollow sanctuary where prayers were mocked by queer movements among the carved figures in cornices and by shadows streaming horribly in the twitching light of a thousand candles.

Throughout the town, all places and things bore evidence to striking revisions in the base realm of matter: precisely sculptured stone began to

loosen and lump, an abandoned cart melded with the sucking mud of the street, and objects in desolate rooms lost themselves in the surfaces they pressed upon, making metal tongs mix with brick hearth, prismatic jewels with lavish velvet, a corpse with the wood of its coffin. At last the faces of Muelenburg became subject to changing expressions which at first were quite subtle, though later these divergences were so exaggerated that it was no longer possible to recapture original forms. It followed that the townspeople could no more recognize themselves than they could one another. All were carried off in the great torrent of their dreams, all spinning in that grayish whirlpool of indefinite twilight, all churning and in the end merging into utter blackness.

It was within this blackness that the souls of Muelenburg struggled and labored and ultimately awoke. The stars and high moon now lit up the night, and it seemed that their town had been returned to them. And so terrible had been their recent ordeal that of its beginning, its progress, and its termination, they could remember … nothing.

“Nothing?” I echoed.

“Of course,” Klingman answered. “All of those terrible memories were left behind in the blackness. How could they bear to bring them back?”

“But your story,” I protested. “These notes I’ve taken tonight.”

“Privileged information, far off the main roads of historical record. You know that sooner or later each of them recollected the episode in detail. It was all waiting for them in the place where they had left it—the blackness which is the domain of death. Or, if you wish, that blackness of the old alchemists’ magic powder.”

I remembered the necromantic learning that Klingman had both 110

professed and proven, but still I observed: “Then nothing can be verified, nothing established as fact.”

“Nothing at all,” he agreed, “except the fact that I am one with the dead of Muelenburg and with all who have known the great dream in all its true

liquescence. They have spoken to me as I am speaking to you. Many reminiscences imparted by those old dreamers, many drunken dialogues I have held with them."

"Like the drunkenness of this dialogue tonight," I said, openly disdaining his narrative.

"Perhaps, only much more vivid, more real. But the yarn which you suppose I alone have spun has served its purpose. To cure you of doubt, you first had to be made a doubter. Until now, pardon my saying so, you have shown no talent in that direction. You believed every wild thing that came along, provided it had the least evidence whatever. Unparalleled credulity. But tonight you have doubted and thus you are ready to be cured of this doubt. And didn't I mention time and again the dangers? Unfortunately, you cannot count yourself among those forgetful souls of Muelenburg. You even have your mnemonic notes, as if anyone will credit them when this night is over. The time is right again, and it has happened more than once, for the grip to go slack and for the return of fluidity in the world. And later so much will have to be washed away, assuming a renascence of things. Fluidity, always fluidity."

When I left his company that night, abandoning the dead and shapeless hours I had spent in that warehouse, Klingman was laughing like a madman. I remember him slouched in that threadbare throne, his face all flushed and contorted, his twisted mouth wailing at some hilarious arcana known only to himself, the sardonic laughter reverberating in the great spaces of the night. To all appearances, some ultimate phase of dissipation had seized his soul.

Nevertheless, that I had underrated or misunderstood the powers of Klaus Klingman was soon demonstrated to me, and to others. But no one else remembers that time when the night would not leave and no dawn appeared to be forthcoming.

During the early part of the crisis there were sensible, rather than apocalyptic, explanations proffered everywhere: blackout, bizarre meteorological phenomena, an eclipse of sorts. Later, these myths became useless and ultimately unnecessary.

For no one else recalls the hysteria that prevailed when the stars 111

and the moon seemed to become swollen in the blackness and to cast a lurid illumination upon the world. How many horrors await in that blackness to be restored to the memories of the dead. For no one else living remembers when everything began to change, no one else with the possible exception of Klaus Klingman.

In the red dawn following that gruesomely protracted night, I went to the warehouse. Unfortunately the place was untenanted, save by its spare furnishings and a few empty bottles. Klingman had disappeared, perhaps into that same blackness for which he seemed to have an incredible nostalgia. I, of course, make no appeals for belief. There can be no belief where there is no doubt.

There cannot be something where there is no nothing. This is far from secret knowledge, as if such knowledge could change anything. This is only how it seems, and seeming is everything.

The Spectacles in the Drawer

Last year at this time, perhaps on this very day, Plomb visited me at my home.

He always seemed to know when I had returned from my habitual travelling and always appeared uninvited on my doorstep. Although this former residence of mine was pathetically run-down, Plomb seemed to regard it as a kind of castle or fortress, always gazing up at its high ceilings as if he were witnessing its wonders for the first time. That day—a dim one, I think—he did not fail to do the same. Then we settled into one of the spacious though sparsely furnished rooms of my house.

“And how were your travels?” he asked, as if only in the spirit of polite conversation. I could see by his smile—an emulation of my own, no doubt—that he was glad to be back in my house and in my company. I smiled too and stood up.

Plomb, of course, stood up along with me, almost simultaneously with my own movements.

“Shall we go then?” I said. What a pest, I thought.

Our footsteps tapped a moderate time on the hard wooden floor leading to the stairway. We ascended to the second floor, which I left almost entirely empty, and then up a narrower stairway to the third floor. Although I had led him along this route several times before, I could see from his wandering eyes that, for him, every tendrilled swirl of wallpaper, every cobweb fluttering in the corners above, every stale draft of the house composed a suspenseful prelude to our destination. At the end of the third-floor hall there was a small wooden stairway, no more than a ladder, that led to an old storeroom where I kept certain things which I collected.

It was not by any means a spacious room, and its enclosed atmosphere was thickened, as Plomb would have emphasized, by its claustrophobic arrangement of tall cabinets, ceiling-high shelves, and

various trunks and crates. This is simply how things worked out over a period of time. In any case, Plomb seemed to favor this state of affairs. “Ah, the room of secret mystery,” he said. “Where all your treasures are kept, all the raw wonders cached away.”

These treasures and wonders, as Plomb called them, were, I suppose, remarkable from a certain point of view. Plomb loved to go through all the old objects and articles, gathering together a lapful of curios and settling down on the dusty sofa at the center of this room. But it was the new items, whenever I returned from one of my protracted tours, that always took precedence in Plomb’s hierarchy of wonders. Thus, I immediately brought out the double-handled dagger with the single blade of polished stone. At first sight of the ceremonial object, Plomb held out the flat palms of his hands, and I placed this exotic device upon its rightful altar. “Who could have made such a thing?” he asked, though rhetorically. He expected no answer to his questions and possibly did not really desire any. And of course I offered no more elaborate an explanation than a simple smile. But how quickly, I noticed, the magic of that first fragment of “speechless wonder,” as he would say, lost its initial surge of fascination. How fast that glistening fog, which surrounded only him, dispersed to unveil a tedious clarity. I had to move faster.

“Here,” I said, my arm searching the shadows of an open wardrobe. “This should be worn when you handle that sacrificial artifact.” And I threw the robe about his shoulders, engulfing his smallish frame with a cyclone of strange patterns and colors. He admired himself in the mirror attached inside the door of the wardrobe. “Look at the robe in the mirror,” he practically shouted. “The designs are all turned around. How much stranger, how much better.” While he stood there glaring at himself, I relieved him of the dagger before he had a chance to do something careless. This left his hands free to raise themselves up to the dust-caked ceiling of the room, and to the dark gods of his imagination.

Gripping each handle of the dagger, I suddenly elevated it above his head, where I held it poised. In a few moments he started to giggle, then fell into spasms of sardonic hilarity. He stumbled over to the old sofa and collapsed

upon its soft cushions. I followed, but when I reached his prostrate form it was not the pale-blue blade that I brought down upon his chest—it was simply a book, one of many I had put before him. His peaked legs created a lectern on which he rested the huge volume, propping it securely as he began turning the 114

stiff crackling pages. The sound seemed to absorb him as much as the sight of a language he could not even name let alone comprehend.

“The lost grimoire of the Abbot of Tine,” he giggled. “Transcribed in the language of—”

“A wild guess,” I interjected. “And a wrong one.”

“Then the forbidden Psalms of the Silent. The book without an author.”

“Without a living author, if you will recall what I told you about it. But you’re very wide of the mark.”

“Well, suppose you give me a hint,” he said with an impatience that surprised me. “Suppose—”

“But wouldn’t you prefer to guess at its wonders, Plomb?” I suggested encouragingly. Some moments of precarious silence passed.

“I suppose I would,” he finally answered, and to my relief. Then I watched him gorge his eyes on the inscrutable script of the ancient volume.

In truth, the mysteries of this Sacred Writ were among the most genuine of their kind, for it had never been my intention to dupe my disciple—as he justly thought of himself—with false secrets. But the secrets of such a book are not absolute: once they are known, they become relegated to a lesser sphere, which is that of the knower. Having lost the prestige they once enjoyed, these former secrets now function as tools in the excavation of still deeper ones which, in turn, will suffer the same corrosive fate. And this is the fate of all true secrets. Eventually the seeker may conclude—either through insight or sheer exhaustion—that this ruthless process is never-ending, that the mortification of one mystery after another has no terminus

beyond that of the seeker's own extinction. And how many still remain susceptible to the search? How many pursue it to the end of their days with undying hope of some ultimate revelation?

Better not to think in precise terms just how few the faithful are. More to the present point, it seems that Plomb was one of their infinitesimal number. And it was my intention to reduce that number by one.

The plan was simple: to feed Plomb's hunger for mysterious sensations to the point of nausea … and beyond. The only thing to survive would be a gutful of shame and regret for a defunct passion.

As Plomb lay upon the sofa, ogling that stupid book, I moved toward a large cabinet whose several doors were composed of a tarnished metal grillwork framed by darkest wood. I opened one of

these doors and exposed a number of shelves cluttered with books and odd objects. Upon one shelf, resting there as sole occupant, was a very white box.

It was no larger, as I mentally envision it, than a modest jewelry case. There were no markings on the box, except the fingerprints, or rather thumbprints, smearing its smooth white surface at its opposing edges and halfway along its length. There were no handles or embellishments of any kind; not even, at first sight, the thinnest of seams to indicate the level at which the lower part of the box met the upper part, or perhaps give away the existence of a drawer. I smiled a little at the mock intrigue of the object, then gripped it from either side, gently, and placed my thumbs precisely over the fresh thumbprints. I applied pressure with each thumb, and a shallow drawer popped open at the front of the box. As hoped, Plomb had been watching me as I went through these meaningless motions.

"What do you have there?" he asked.

"Patience, Plomb. You will see," I answered while delicately removing two sparkling items from the drawer: one a small and silvery knife which very

much resembled a razor-sharp letter opener, and the other a pair of old-fashioned wire-rimmed spectacles.

Plomb laid aside the now-boring book and sat up straight against the arm of the sofa. I sat down beside him and opened up the spectacles so that the stems were pointing toward his face. When he leaned forward, I slipped them on. “They’re only plain glass,” he said with a definite tone of disappointment. “Or a very weak prescription.” His eyes rolled about as he attempted to scrutinize what rested upon his own face. Without saying a word, I held up the little knife in front of him until he finally took notice of it. “Ahhhh,” he said, smiling.

“There’s more to it.” “Of course there is,” I said, gently twirling the steely blade before his fascinated eyes. “Now hold out your palm, just like that. Good, good. You won’t even feel this, completely harmless. Now,” I instructed him, “keep watching that tiny red trickle.

“Your eyes are now fused with those fantastic lenses, and your sight is one with its object. And what exactly is that object? Obviously it is everything that fascinates, everything that has power over your gaze and your dreams. You cannot even conceive the wish to look away. And even if there are no simple images to see, nonetheless there is a vision of some kind, an infinite and overwhelming scene expanding before you. And the vastness of this scene is such that even the dazzling diffusion of all the known universes cannot convey its 116

wonder. Everything is so brilliant, so great, and so alive: landscapes without end that are rolling with life, landscapes that are themselves alive.

Unimaginable diversity of form and motion, design and dimension. And each detail is perfectly crystalline, from the mammoth shapes lurching in outline against endless horizons to the minutest cilia wriggling in an obscure oceanic niche.

Even this is only a mere fragment of all that there is to see and to know. There are labyrinthine astronomies, discrete systems of living mass which yet are woven together by a complex of intersections, at points mingling in a way that mutually affects those systems involved, yielding instantaneous

evolutions, constant transformations of both appearance and essence. You are witness to all that exists or ever could exist. And yet, somehow concealed in the shadows of all that you can see is something that is not yet visible, something that is beating like a thunderous pulse and promises still greater visions: all else is merely its membrane enclosing the ultimate thing waiting to be born, preparing for the cataclysm which will be both the beginning and the end. To behold the prelude to this event must be an experience of unbearable anticipation, so that hope and dread merge into a new emotion, one corresponding perfectly to the absolute and the wholly unknown. The next instant, it seems, will bring with it a revolution of all matter and energy. But the seconds keep passing, the experience grows more fascinating without fulfilling its portents, without extinguishing itself in revelation. And although the visions remain active inside you, deep in your blood—you now awake."

Pushing himself up from the sofa, Plomb staggered forward a few steps and wiped his bloodied palm on the front of his shirt, as if to wipe away the visions. He shookhis head vigorously once or twice, but the spectacles remained secure.

"Is everything all right?" I asked him.

Plomb appeared to be dazzled in the worst way. Behind the spectacles his eyes gazed dumbly, and his mouth gaped with countless unspoken words. However, when I said, "Perhaps I should remove these for you," his hand rose toward mine, as if to prevent me from doing so. But his effort was half-hearted. Folding their wire stems one across the other, I replaced them back in their box. Plomb now watched me, as if I were performing some ritual of great fascination. He seemed to be still composing himself from the experience.

"Well?" I asked.

"Dreadful," he answered. "But…"

"But?"

“But I…”

“You?”

“What I mean is—where did they come from?”

“Can’t you imagine that for yourself?” I countered. And for a moment it seemed that in this case, too, he desired some simple answer, contrary to his most hardened habits. Then he smiled rather deviously and threw himself down upon the sofa. His eyes glazed over as he fabricated an anecdote to his fancy.

“I can see you,” he said, “at an occultist auction in a disreputable quarter of a foreign city. The box is carried forward, the spectacles taken out. They were made several generations ago by a man who was at once, a student of the Gnostics and a master of optometry. His ambition: to construct a pair of artificial eyes that would allow him to bypass the obstacle of physical appearances and glimpse a far-off realm of secret truth whose gateway is within the depths of our own blood.”

“Remarkable,” I replied. “Your speculation is so close to truth itself that the details are not worth mentioning for the mere sake of vulgar correctness.”

In fact, the spectacles belonged to a lot of antiquarian rubbish I once bought blindly, and the box was of unknown, or rather unremembered, origin—just something I had lying around in my attic room. And the knife, a magician’s prop for efficiently slicing up paper money and silk ties.

I carried the box containing both spectacles and knife over to Plomb, holding it slightly beyond his reach. I said, “Can you imagine the dangers involved, the possible nightmare of possessing such ‘artificial eyes’?” He nodded gravely in agreement. “And you can imagine the restraint the possessor of such a gruesome artifact must practice.” His eyes were all comprehension, and he was sucking a little at his slightly lacerated palm. “Then nothing would please me more than to pass the ownership of this obscure miracle on to you, my dear Plomb. I’m sure you will hold it in wonder as no one else could.”

And it was exactly this wonder that it was my malicious aim to undermine, or rather to expand until it ripped itself apart. For I could no longer endure the sight of it.

As Plomb once again stood at the door of my home, holding his 118

precious gift with a child's awkward embrace, I could not resist asking him the question. Opening the door for him, I said, "By the way, Plomb, have you ever been hypnotized?"

"I …" he answered.

"You," I prompted.

"No," he said. "Why do you ask?"

"Curiosity," I replied. "You know how I am. Well, good-night, Plomb."

And I closed the door behind the most willing subject in the world, hoping it would be some time before he returned. "If ever," I said aloud, and the words echoed in the hollows of my home.

But it was not long afterward that Plomb and I had our next confrontation, though the circumstances were odd and accidental. Late one afternoon, as it happens, I was browsing through a shop that dealt in secondhand merchandise of the most pathetic sort. The place was littered with rusty scales that once would have given your weight for a penny, cock-eyed bookcases, dead toys, furniture without style or substance, grotesque standing ashtrays late of some hotel lobby, and a hodge-podge of old-fashioned fixtures. For me, however, such decrepit bazaars offered more diversion and consolation than the most exotic marketplaces, which so often made good on their strange promises that mystery itself ceased to have meaning. But my secondhand seller made no promises and inspired no dreams, leaving all that to those more ambitious hucksters who trafficked in such perishable stock in trade. At the time I could ask no more of a given gray afternoon than to find myself in one of these enchantingly desolate establishments.

That particular afternoon in the secondhand shop brought me a brief glimpse of Plomb in a secondhand manner. The visual transaction took place in a mirror that leaned against a wall, one of the many mirrors that seemed to constitute a specialty of the shop. I had squatted down before this rectangular relic, whose frame reminded me of the decorated borders of old books, and wiped my bare hand across its dusty surface. And there, hidden beneath the dust, was the face of Plomb, who must have just entered the shop and was standing a room's length away. While he seemed to recognize immediately the 119

reverse side of me, his expression betrayed the hope that I had not seen him.

There was shock as well as shame upon that face, and something else besides. And if Plomb had approached me, what could I have said to him? Perhaps I would have mentioned that he did not look very well or that it appeared he had been the victim of an accident. But how could he explain what had happened to him except to reveal the truth that we both knew and neither would speak? Fortunately, this scene was to remain in its hypothetical state, because a moment later he was out the door.

I cautiously approached the front window of the shop in time to see Plomb hurrying off into the dull, unreflecting day, his right hand held up to his face. "It was only my intention to cure him," I mumbled to myself. I had not considered that he was incurable, nor that things would have developed in the way they did.

And after that day I wondered, eventually to the point of obsession, what kind of hell had claimed poor Plomb for its own. I knew only that I had provided him with a type of toy: the subliminal ability to feast his eyes on an imaginary universe in a rivulet of his own blood. The possibility that he would desire to magnify this experience, or indeed that he would be capable of such a feat, had not seriously occurred to me. Obviously, however, this had become the case. I now had to ask myself how much farther could Plomb's situation be extended. The answer, though I could not guess it at the time, was presented to me in a dream.

And it seemed fitting that the dream had its setting in that old attic storeroom of my house, which Plomb once prized above all other rooms in

the world. I was sitting in a chair, a huge and enveloping chair which in reality does not exist but in the dream directly faces the sofa. No thoughts or feelings troubled me, and I had only the faintest sense that someone else was in the room. But I could not see who it was, because everything appeared so dim in outline, blurry and grayish. There seemed to be some movement in the region of the sofa, as if the enormous cushions themselves had become lethargically restless. Unable to fathom the source of this movement, I touched my hand to my temple in thought. This was how I discovered that I was

wearing a pair of spectacles with circular lenses connected to wiry stems. I thought to myself: “If I remove these spectacles I will be able to see more clearly.” But a voice told me not to remove them, and I recognized that voice.

“Plomb,” I said. And then something moved, like a man-shaped shadow, upon the sofa. A climate of dull horror began to invade my surroundings. “Even if your trip is over,” I said deliriously, you have nothing to show for it.” But the voice disagreed with me in sinister whispers that made no sense but seemed filled with meaning. I would indeed be shown things, these whispers might have said. Already I was being shown things, astonishing things—mysteries and marvels beyond anything I had ever suspected. And suddenly all my feelings, as I gazed through the spectacles, were proof of that garbled pronouncement. They were feelings of a peculiar nature which, to my knowledge, one experiences only in dreams: sensations of infinite expansiveness and ineffable meaning that have no place elsewhere in our lives. But although these monstrous, astronomical emotions suggested wonders of incredible magnitude and character, I saw nothing through those magic lenses except this: the obscure shape in the shadows before me as its outline grew clearer and clearer to my eyes. Gradually I came to view what appeared to be a mutilated carcass, something of a terrible rawness, a torn and flayed thing whose every laceration could be traced in crystalline sharpness. The only thing of color in my grayish surroundings, it twitched and quivered like a gory heart exposed beneath the body of the dream. And

it made a sound like hellish giggling. Then it said: “I am back from my trip,” in a horrible, piercing voice.

It was this simple statement that inspired my efforts to tear the spectacles from my face, even though they now seemed to be part of my flesh. I gripped them with both hands and flung them against the wall, where they shattered. Somehow this served to exorcise my tormented companion, who faded back into the grayness. Then I looked at the wall and saw that it was running red where the spectacles had struck. And the broken lenses that lay upon the floor were bleeding.

To experience such a dream as this on a single occasion might very well be the stuff of a haunting, lifelong memory, something that perhaps might even be cherished for its unfathomable depths of feeling. But to suffer over and over this same nightmare, as I soon found was my fate, leads one to seek nothing so much as a cure to kill

the dream, to reveal all its secrets and thus bring about a selective amnesia.

At first I looked to the sheltering shadows of my home for deliverance and forgetfulness, the sobering shadows which at other times had granted me a cold and stagnant peace. I tried to argue myself free of my nightly excursions, to discourse these visions away, lecturing the walls contra the prodigies of a mysterious world. “Since any form of existence,” I muttered, “since any form of existence is by definition a conflict of forces, or it is nothing at all, what can it possibly matter if these skirmishes take place in a world of marvels or one of mud? The difference between the two is not worth mentioning, or none.

Such distinctions are the work of only the crudest and most limited perspectives, the sense of mystery and wonder foremost among them. Even the most esoteric ecstasy, when it comes down to it, requires the prop of vulgar pain in order to stand up as an experience. Having acknowledged the truth, however provisional, and the reality, if subject to mutation, of all the strange things in the universe—whether known, unknown, or merely suspected—one is left with no recourse than to conclude that none of them

makes any difference, that such marvels change nothing: our experience remains the same. The gallery of human sensations that existed in prehistory is identical to the one that faces each life today, that will continue to face each new life as it enters this world…

and then looks beyond it."

And thus I attempted to reason my way back to self-possession. But no measure of my former serenity was forthcoming. On the contrary, my days as well as my nights were now poisoned by an obsession with Plomb. Why had I given him those spectacles! More to the point, why did I allow him to retain them? It was time to take back my gift, to confiscate those little bits of glass and twisted metal that were now harrowing the wrong mind. And since I had succeeded too well in keeping him away from my door, I would have to be the one to approach his.

But it was not Plomb who answered the rotting door of that house which stood at the street's end and beside a broad expanse of empty field. It was not Plomb who asked if I was a newspaper journalist or

a policeman before closing that gouged and filthy door in my face when I replied that I was neither of those persons. Pounding on that wobbling door, which seemed about to crumble under my fist, I summoned the sunken-eyed man a second time to ask if this in fact was Mr. Plomb's address. I had never visited him at his home, that hopeless little box in which he lived and slept and dreamed.

"Was he a relative?"

"No," I answered.

"A friend. You're not here to collect a bill, because if that's the case …"

For the sake of simplicity I interjected that, yes, I was a friend of Mr. Plomb.

“Then how is it you don’t know?”

For the sake of my curiosity I said that I had been away on a trip, as I often was, and had my own reasons for notifying Mr. Plomb of my return.

“Then you don’t know anything,” he stated flatly.

“Exactly,” I replied.

“It was even in the newspaper. And they asked me about him.”

“Plomb,” I confirmed.

“That’s right,” he said, as if he had suddenly become the custodian of a secret knowledge.

Then he waved me into the house and led me through its ugly, airless interior to a small storage room at the back. He reached along the wall inside the room, as if he wanted to avoid entering it, and switched on the light. Immediately I understood why the hollowfaced man preferred not to go into that room, for Plomb had renovated that tiny space in a very strange way. Each wall, as well as the ceiling and floor, was a mosaic of mirrors, a shocking galaxy of redundant reflections. And each mirror was splattered with sinister droplets, as if someone had swung several brushfuls of paint from various points throughout the room, spreading dark stars across a silvery firmament. In his attempt to exhaust or exaggerate the visions to which he had apparently become enslaved, Plomb had done nothing less than multiplied these visions into infinity, creating oceans of his own blood and enabling himself to see with countless eyes. Entranced by such aspiration, I gazed at the mirrors in speechless wonder. Among them was one I remembered looking into some days—or was it weeks? —before.

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The landlord, who did not follow me into the room, said something about suicide and a body ripped raw. This news was of course unnecessary, even boring. But I was overwhelmed at Plomb’s ingenuity: it was some time before I could look away from that gallery of glass and gore. Only

afterward did I fully realize that I would never be rid of the horrible Plomb. He had broken through all the mirrors, projected himself into the eternity beyond them.

And even when I abandoned my home, with its hideous attic storeroom, Plomb still followed me in my dreams. He now travels with me to the ends of the earth, initiating me night after night into his unspeakable wonders. I can only hope that we will not meet in another place, one where the mysteries are always new and dreams never end. Oh, Plomb, will you not stay in that box where they have put your riven body?

The Strange Design of Master Rignolo

It was well into evening and for some time Nolon had been seated at a small table in a kind of park. This was a long, thin stretch of land— vaguely triangular in shape, like a piece of broken glass—bordered by three streets of varying breadth, varying evenness of surface, and of varying stages of disintegration as each thoroughfare succumbed in its own way and in its own time to the subtle but continuous movements of the slumbering earth below. From the far end of the park a figure in a dark overcoat was approaching Nolon's table, and it appeared there was going to be a meeting of some sort.

There were other tables here and there, all of them unoccupied, but most of the park was unused ground covered with a plush, fuzzy kind of turf. In the moonlight this densely woven pile of vegetation turned a soft shade of aquamarine, almost radiant. Beyond the thinning trees, stars were bright but without luster, as if they were made of luminous paper. Around the park, a jagged line of high roofs, black and featureless, crossed the sky like the uneven teeth of an old saw.

Nolon was resting his hands at the edge of the small, nearly circular table. In the middle of the table a piece of candle flickered inside a misshapen bubble of green glass, and Nolon's face was bathed in a restless green glare. He too was wearing a dark overcoat, unbuttoned at the top to reveal a scarf of lighter shade stuffed inside it. The scarf was wrapped about Nolon's neck right to the base of his chin. Every so often Nolon glanced up, not to look at Grissul as he proceeded across the park, but to try and catch sight of something in that lighted window across the street: a silhouette which at irregular intervals slipped in and out of view. Above the window was a long, low roof surmounted by a board which appeared to be a sign or marquee.

The lettering on this board was entirely unreadable, perhaps corroded by the elements or even deliberately effaced. But the image of two tall, thin bottles could still be seen, their slender necks angled festively this way and that.

Grissul sat down, facing Nolon at eye level.

“Have you been here long?” he asked.

Nolon calmly pulled out a watch from deep inside his coat. He stared at it for a few moments, tapped the glass once or twice, then gently pushed it back inside his coat.

“Someone must have known I was thinking about seeing you,” Grissul continued, “because I’ve got a little story I could tell.”

Nolon again glanced toward the lighted window across the street. Grissul noticed this and twisted his head around, saying, “Well, someone’s there after all. Do you think tonight we could get, you know, a little service of some kind?”

“Maybe you could go over there yourself and see what our chances are,” Nolon replied.

“All the same to me,” Grissul insisted, twisting his head back to face Nolon.

“I’ve still got my news.”

“Is that specifically why this meeting is taking place?”

To this query Grissul returned a blank expression. “Not that I know of,” he asserted. “As far as I’m concerned, we just met by chance.”

“Of course,” Nolon agreed, smiling a little. Grissul smiled back but with much less subtlety.

“So I was going to tell you,” Grissul began, “that I was out in that field, the one behind those empty buildings at the edge of town where everything just slides away and goes off in all directions. And there’s a marsh by there, makes the ground a little, I don’t know, stringy or something. No trees, though, only a lot of wild grass, reeds, you know where I mean?”

“I now have a good idea,” Nolon replied, a trifle bored or at least pretending to be.

“This was a little before dark that I was there. A little before the stars began to come out. I really wasn’t planning to do anything, let me say that. I just walked some ways out onto the field, changed direction a few times, walked a ways more. Then I saw something through a blind of huge stalks of some kind, skinny as your finger but with these great spiky heads on top. And really very stiff, not bending at all, just

sort of wobbling in the breeze. They might well have creaked, I don’t know, when I pushed my way through to see beyond them. Then I knelt down to get a better look at what was there on the ground. I’m telling you, Mr. Nolon, it was right in the ground. It appeared to be a part of it, like—”

“Mr. Grissul, what appeared?”

Grissul remembered himself and found a tone of voice not so exhausting of his own strength, nor so wearing on his listener’s patience.

“The face,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “It was right there, about the size of, I don’t know, a window or a picture hanging on a wall, except that it was in the ground and it was a big oval, not rectangular in any way. Just as if someone had partly buried a giant, or better yet, a giant’s mask. Only the edges of the face seemed not so much buried as, well, woven I guess you would say, right into the ground. The eyes were closed, not shut closed—it didn’t seem to be dead—but relaxed. The same with the lips, very heavy lips rubbing up against each other. Even complexion, ashy gray, and soft

cheeks. They looked soft, I mean, because I didn't actually touch them in any way. I think it was asleep."

Nolon shifted slightly in his chair and looked straight into Grissul's eyes.

"Then come and see for yourself," Grissul insisted. "The moon's bright enough."

"That's not the problem. I'm perfectly willing to go along with you, whatever might be there. But for once I have other plans."

"Oh, other plans," repeated Grissul as if some deeply hidden secret had been revealed. "And what other plans would those be, Mr. Nolon?"

"Plans of relatively long standing and not altered since made, if you can conceive of such a thing these days. Are you listening? Oh, I thought you nodded off. Well, Rignolo, that mysterious little creature, has made a rare move. He's asked if I would like to have a look around his studio. No one's ever been there that I know of. And no one's actually seen what he paints."

"No one that you know of," added Grissul.

"Of course. Until tonight, that is, a little while from now unless a change of plans is necessary. Otherwise I shall be the first to see what all that talk of

his is about. It should really be worth the trouble, and I could invite you to come along."

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Grissul's lower lip pushed forward a little. "Thank you, Mr. Nolon," he said, "but that's more in your line. I thought when I told you about my observation this evening—"

"Of course, your observation is very interesting, extraordinary, Mr. Grissul.

But I think that that sort of thing can wait, don't you? Besides, I haven't told you anything of Rignolo's work"

"You can tell me."

"Landscapes, Mr. Grissul. Nothing but landscapes. Exclusively his subject, a point he even brags about."

"That's very interesting, too."

"I thought you would say something like that. And you might be even more interested if you had ever heard Rignolo discourse on his canvasses. But…

well, you can see and hear for yourself. What do you say, then? First Rignolo's studio and then straight out to see if we can find that old field again?"

They agreed that these activities, in this sequence, would not be the worst way to fill an evening.

As they got up from the table, Nolon had a last look at the window across the street. The light that once brightened it must have been put out during his conversation with Grissul. So there was no way of knowing whether or not someone was now observing them. Buttoning their overcoats as far as their scarfed necks, the two men walked in silence across the park upon which countless stars stared down like the dead eyes of sculptured faces.

"Don't just walk stepping everywhere," Rignolo told his visitors as they all entered the studio. He was a little out of breath from the climb up the stairs, wheezing his words, quietly muttering to himself, "This place, oh, this place."

There was hardly a patch of floor that was not in some way cluttered over, so he need not have warned Nolon, or even Grissul. Rignolo was of lesser stature than his guests, virtually a dwarf, and so moved with greater freedom through that cramped space. "You see," he said, "how this isn't really a room up here, just a little closet that tried to grow into one, bulging out every which way and making all these odd niches and alcoves surrounding us, this shapeless gallery of nooks. There's a window around here, I suppose, under some of these canvasses. But those are what you're

here for, not to look out some window that who knows where it is. Nothing to see out there, even so."

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Rignolo then ushered his visitors through the shrunken maze composed of recesses of one sort or another, indicating to them a canvass here or there. Each somehow held itself to a wall or was leaning against one, as if with exhaustion. Having brought their attention to this or that picture, he would step a little to the side and allow them to admire his work, standing there like a polite but slightly bored curator of some seldom-visited museum, a pathetic figure attired in oversized clothes of woven … dust. His small ovoid face was as lifeless as a mask: his skin had the same faded complexion as his clothes and was just as slack, flabby; his lips were the same color as his skin but more full and taut; his hair shot out in tufts from his head, uncontrolled, weedy; and his eyes showed too much white, having to all appearances rolled up halfway into his forehead, as if they were trying to peek under it.

While Nolon was gazing at one of Rignolo's landscapes, Grissul seemed unable to shake off a preoccupation with the artist himself, though he was obviously making the effort. But the more he tried to turn his attention away from Rignolo, the more easily it was drawn back to the flabby skin, the faded complexion, the undisciplined shocks of hair. Finally, Grissul gave a little nudge to Nolon and began to whisper something. Nolon looked at Grissul in a way that might have said, "Yes, I know, but have some sense of decorum in any case,"

then resumed his contemplation of Rignolo's excellent landscapes.

They were all very similar to one another. Given such titles as “Glistening Marsh,” “The Tract of Three Shadows,” and “The Stars, the Hills” they were not intended to resemble as much as suggest the promised scenes. A vague hint of material forms might emerge here and there, some familiar effect of color or outline, but for the most part they could be described as extremely remote in their perspective on tangible reality. Grissul, who was no stranger to some of the locales purportedly depicted in these canvasses, could very well have expressed the objection that these conglomerations of fractured mass, these whirlpools of distorted light, simply did not achieve their purpose, did not in fact deserve connection with the geographical subjects from which they took their titles. Perhaps it was Rignolo’s intuition that just such a protest might be forthcoming that inspired—in the rapid, frantic voice of a startled sleeper—the following outburst.

“Think anything you like about these scenes, it’s all the same to 129

me. Whisper to each other, my hearing is wonderfully bad. Say that my landscapes do not invite one’s eyes to pass into them and wander, let alone linger for the briefest moment. Nevertheless, that is exactly their purpose, and as far as I am concerned they are quite adequate to it, meticulously efficient. I have spent extraordinary lengths of time within the borders of each canvass, both as maker and as casual inhabitant, until the borders no longer exist for me and neither does … that other thing. Understand that when I say inhabitant, I do not in any way mean that I take my clumsy feet tromping up and down staircases of color, or that I stand this stunted body of mine upon some lofty ledge where I can play the master of all I see. There are no masters of these scenes and no seers, because bodies and their organs cannot function there—no place for them to go, nothing to survey with ordinary eyes, no thoughts to think for the mighty brain. And my thoroughfares will not take you from the doorstep of one weariness to the backdoor of another, and they cannot crumble, because they are burdened with nothing to convey—their travelers are already there, continuously

arriving at infinite sites of the perpetually astonishing. Yet these sites are also a homeland, and nothing there will ever threaten to become strange. What I mean to say is that to inhabit my landscapes one must, in no figurative sense, grow into them. At best they are a paradise for sleepwalkers, but only those sleepwalkers who never rise to their feet, who forget their destination, and who may thus never reach that ultimate darkness beyond dreams, but may loiter in perpetuity in these lands of mine, which neighbor on nothingness and stand next door to endlessness. So you see, my critics, what we have in these little pictures is a living communion with the void, a vital annihilation and a thoroughly decorative eternity of—"

"All the same," Grissul interjected, "it does sound unpleasant."

"You're interfering," Nolon said under his breath.

"The old bag of wind," Grissul said under his.

"And just where do you see the unpleasantness? Where, show me. Nowhere, in my view. One cannot be unpleasant to one's self, one cannot be strange to oneself.

I claim that all will be different when one is joined with the landscape. We need not go the way of doom when such a hideaway is so near at hand—a land of escape. For the initiated, each of those little swirls is a cove which one may enter into and become; each line—jagged or merely jittery—is a cartographer's shoreline which may be explored at all points at once; each crinkled 130

wad of radiance is a star basking in its own light, and in yours. This, gentlemen, is a case of making the most of one's talent for projection. There indeed exist actual locales on which my pictures are based, I admit that. But these places keep their distance from the spectator: whereas my new landscapes make you feel at home, those old ones put you off, hold you at arm's length, and in the end throw you right out of the picture. That's the way it is out there—everything looks at you with strange eyes. But you can get around this intolerable situation, jump the fence, so to speak, and trespass into a world where you belong for a change. If my landscapes look unfamiliar to you, it is only because everything looks different from the other side. All this will be understood much more clearly when you have seen my masterwork. Step this way, please."

Nolon and Grissul glanced blankly at each other and then followed the artist up to a narrow door. Opening the door with a tiny key, Rignolo ushered his guests inside. It was a tight squeeze through the doorway.

"Now this place really is a closet," Grissul whispered to Nolon. "I don't think I can turn around."

"Then we'll just have to walk out of here backwards, as if there were something wrong with that."

The door slammed closed and for a moment there was no place on earth darker than that little room.

"Watch the walls," Rignolo called through the door.

“Walls?” someone whispered.

The first images to appear in the darkness were those crinkled wads of radiance Rignolo spoke of, except these were much larger, more numerous, and became more radiant than the others bound within their cramped little canvasses. And they emerged on all sides of the spectator, above and below as well, so that an irresistible conviction was instilled that the tiny gravelike room had expanded into a starstrewn corridor of night, the certainty created that one was suspended in space without practical means of remaining there. Reaching out for the solid walls, crouching on the floor, only brought confusion rather than relief from the sense of impossibility. The irregular daubs of brightness grew into great silver blotches, each of them ragged at its rim and glowing wildly.

Then they stopped growing in the blackness, attaining some predesigned composition, and another kind of growing began: thin filaments of bluish light started sprouting in the spaces

between those bulbous thistles of brilliance, running everywhere like cracks up and down a wall. And these threadlike, hairlike tendrils eventually spread across the blackness in an erratic fury of propagation, until all was webbed and stringy in the universal landscape. Then the webbing began to fray and grow shaggy, cosmic moss hanging in luminous clumps, beards. But the scene was not muddled, no more so, that is, than the most natural marsh or fen-like field.

Finally, enormous stalks shot out of nowhere, quickly crisscrossed to form interesting and well-balanced patterns, and suddenly froze. They were a strange shade of green and wore burry crowns of a pinkish color, like prickly brains.

The scene, it appeared, was now complete. All the actual effects were displayed: actual because the one further effect now being produced was most likely an illusion. For it seemed that deep within the shredded tapestry of webs and hairs and stalks, something else had been woven, something buried beneath the marshy morass but slowly rising to the surface.

“Is that a face?” someone said.

“I can begin to see one too,” said the other, “but I don’t know if I want to see it. I don’t think I can feel where I am now. Let’s try not to look at those faces.”

A series of cries from within the little room finally induced Rignolo to open the door, which sent Nolon and Grissul tumbling backwards into the artist’s studio. They lay among the debris on the floor for some time. Rignolo swiftly secured the door, and then stood absolutely still beside it, his upturned eyes taking no interest in his visitors’ predicament. As they regained their feet, a few things were quickly settled in low voices.

“Mr. Nolon, I recognized the place that that room is supposed to be.”

“I’m sure you did.”

“And I’m also sure I know whose face it was that I saw tonight in that field.”

“I think we should be going.”

“What are you saying?” demanded Rignolo.

Nolon gestured toward a large clock high upon the wall and asked if that was the time.

“Always,” replied Rignolo, “since I’ve never yet seen its hands move.”

“Well, then, thank you for everything,” said Nolon.

“We have to be leaving,” added Grissul.

“Just one moment,” Rignolo shouted as they were making their way out. “I know where you’re going now. Someone, I won’t say who, told me what you found in that field. I’ve done it, haven’t I? You can tell me all about it. No, it’s not necessary. I’ve put myself into the scene at last. The abyss with a decor, the ultimate flight! In short— survival in the very maw of oblivion. Oh, perhaps there’s still some work to be done. But I’ve made agood start, haven’t I? I’ve got my foot in the door, my face looking in the window. Little by little, then … forever. True? No, don’t say anything. Show me where it is, I need to go there. I have a right to go.”

Having no idea what sort of behavior a refusal might inspire in the maniacal Rignolo, not to mention possible reprisals from unknown parts, Nolon and Grissul respected the artist’s request.

Into a scene which makes no sound, three figures arrive. Their silhouettes move with distinct, cautious steps across an open field, progressing slowly, almost without noticeable motion. Around them, crisscrossing shafts of tall grasses are entirely motionless, their pointed tips sharply outlined in the moonlight. Above them, the moon is round and bright; but its brightness is of a dull sort, like the flat whiteness that appears in the spaces of complex designs embellishing the page of a book.

The three figures, one of which is much shorter than the other two, have stopped and are standing completely still before a particularly dense clump of oddly shaped stalks. Now one of the taller figures has raised his arm and is pointing toward this clump of stalks, while the shorter figure has taken a step in the direction indicated. The two tall figures are standing together as the short one has all but disappeared into the dark, dense overgrowth. Only a single shoe, its toe angled groundward, remains visible. Then nothing at all.

The two remaining figures continue to stand in their places, making no gestures, their hands in the pockets of their long overcoats. They are staring into the blackness where the other one has disappeared. Around them, crisscrossing shafts of tall grasses; above them, the moon is round and bright.

Now the two figures have turned themselves away from the place where the other one disappeared. They are each slightly bent over and are holding their hands over their ears, as though to deafen themselves to something they could not bear. Then, slowly, almost without noticeable motion, they move out of the scene.

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The field is empty once again. And now everything awakes with movement and sound.

After their adventure, Nolon and Grissul returned to the same table in that place they had met earlier that evening. But where they had left a bare table-top behind them, not considering the candleflame within its unshapely green bubble, there were at the moment two shallow glasses set out, along with a tall, if somewhat thin bottle placed between them. They looked at the bottle, the glasses, and each other methodically, as if they did not want to rush into anything.

“Is there still, you know, someone in the window across the street?” Grissul asked.

“Do you think I should look?” Nolon asked back.

Grissul stared at the table, allowing moments to accumulate, then said, “I don’t care, Mr. Nolon, I have to say that what happened tonight was very unpleasant.”

“Something like that would have happened sooner or later,” Nolon replied. “He was too much the dreamer, let’s be honest. Nothing he said made any sense to speak of, and he was always saying more than he should. Who knows who heard what.”

“I’ve never heard screaming like that.”

“It’s over,” said Nolon quietly.

“But what could have happened to him?” asked Grissul, gripping the shallow glass before him, apparently without awareness of the move.

“Only he could know that for certain,” answered Nolon, who mirrored Grissul’s move and seemingly with the same absence of conscious intent.

“And why did he scream that way, why did he say it was all a trick, a mockery of his dreams, that ‘filthy thing in the earth’? Why did he scream not to be ‘buried forever in that strange, horrible mask’?”

“Maybe he became confused,” said Nolon. Nervously, he began pouring from the thin bottle into each of their glasses.

“And then he cried out for someone to kill him. But that’s not what he wanted at all, just the opposite. He was afraid to you-know-what. So why would he—”

“Do I really have to explain it all, Mr. Grissul?”

“I suppose not,” Grissul said very softly, looking ashamed. “He was trying to get away, to get away with something.”

“That’s right,” said Nolon just as softly, looking around. “Because he wanted to escape from here without having to you-know-what. How would that look?”

“Set an example.”

“Exactly. Now let’s just take advantage of the situation and drink our drinks before moving on.”

“I’m not sure I want to,” said Grissul.

“I’m not sure we have any say in the matter,” replied Nolon.

“Yes, but—”

“Shhh. Tonight’s our night.”

Across the street a shadow fidgeted in the frame of a lighted window. An evening breeze moved through the little park, and the green glow of a candleflame flickered upon two silent faces.

The Shadow at the Bottom of the World

Before there occurred anything of a truly prodigious nature, the season had manifestly erupted with some feverish intent. This, at least, was how it appeared to us, whether we happened to live in town or somewhere outside its limits. (And travelling between town and countryside was Mr. Marble, who had been studying the seasonal signs far longer and in greater depth than we, disclosing prophecies that no one would credit at the time.) On the calendars which hung in so many of our homes, the monthly photograph illustrated the spirit of the numbered days below it: sheaves of cornstalks standing brownish and brittle in a newly harvested field, a narrow house and wide barn in the background, a sky of empty light above, and fiery leafage frolicking about the edges of the scene. But something dark, something abysmal always finds its way into the bland beauty of such pictures, something that usually holds itself in abeyance, some entwining presence that we always know is there. And it was exactly this presence that had gone into crisis, or perhaps had been secretly invoked by small shadowy voices calling out in the midst of our dreams. There came a bitter scent into the air, as of sweet wine turning to vinegar, and there was an hysteric brilliance flourished by the trees in town as well as those in the woods beyond, while along the roads between were the intemperate displays of thornapple, sumac, and towering sunflowers that nodded behind crooked roadside fences. Even the stars of chill nights seemed to grow delirious and take on the tints of an earthly inflammation. Finally, there was a moonlit field where a scarecrow had been left to watch over ground that had long been cleared yet would not turn cold.

Adjacent to the edge of town, the field allowed full view of itself from so many of our windows. It lay spacious beyond tilting 136

fenceposts and under a bright round moon, uncluttered save for the peaked silhouettes of corn shocks and a manlike shape that stood fixed in the nocturnal solitude. The head of the figure was slumped forward, as if a grotesque slumber had overtaken its straw-stuffed body, and the arms were slackly extended in a way that suggested some incredible gesture toward flight. For a moment it seemed to be an insistent wind which was flapping those patched-up overalls and fluttering the worn flannel of those shirt sleeves; and it would seem a forceful wind indeed which caused that stitched-up head to nod in its dreams. But nothing else joined in such movements: the withered leaves of the cornstalks were stiff and unstirring, the trees of the distant woods were in a lull against the clear night. Only one thing appeared to be living where the moonlight spread across that dead field. And there were some who claimed that the scarecrow actually raised its arms and its empty face to the sky, as though declaring itself to the heavens, while others thought that its legs kicked wildly, like those of a man who is hanged, and that they kept on kicking for the longest time before the thing collapsed and lay quiet. Many of us, we discovered, had been nudged from our beds that night, called as witnesses to this obscure spectacle. Afterward, the sight we had seen, whatever we believed its reason, would not rest within us but snatched at the edges of our sleep until morning.

And during the overcast hours of the following day we could not keep ourselves from visiting the place around which various rumors had hastily arisen. As pilgrims we wandered into that field, scrutinizing the debris of its harvest for augural signs, circling that scarecrow as if it were a great idol in shabby disguise, a sacred avatar out of season. But everything upon that land seemed unwilling to support our hunger for revelation, and our congregation was lost in fidgeting bemusement. (With the exception, of course, of Mr. Marble, whose eyes, we recall, were gleaming with illuminations he could not offer us in any words we would understand.) The sky had hidden itself behind a leaden vault of clouds, depriving us of the crucial element of pure sunlight which we needed to fully burn off the misty dreams of the past night. And a vine-twisted stone wall along the property line of the farm was the same shade as the sky, while the dormant vines themselves were as colorless as the stone they enmeshed like a strange network of dead veins. But this calculated grayness was merely an aspect of the scene, for the colors of the abundant woods along the 137

margins of the landscape were undulled, as if those radiant leaves possessed some inner source of illumination or stood in contrast to some deeper shadow which they served to mask.

Such conditions no doubt impeded our efforts to come to terms with our fears about that particular field. Above all these manifestations, however, was the fact that the earth of those harvested acres, especially in the area surrounding the scarecrow, was unnaturally warm for the season. It seemed, in fact, that a late harvest was due. And some insisted that the odd droning

noises that filled the air could not be blamed on the legions of local cicadas but indeed rose up from under the ground.

By the time of twilight, only a few stragglers remained in the field, among them the old farmer who owned this suddenly notorious acreage. We knew that he shared the same impulse as the rest of us when he stepped up to his scarecrow and began to tear the impostor to pieces. Others joined in the vandalism, pulling out handfuls of straw and stripping away the clothes until they had exposed what lay beneath them—the strange and unexpected sight.

For the skeleton of the thing should have been merely two crosswise planks. We verified this common fact with its maker, and he swore that no other materials had been used. Yet the shape that stood before us was of a wholly different nature. It was something black and twisted into the form of a man, something that seemed to have come up from the earth and grown over the wooden planks like a dark fungus, consuming the structure. There were now black legs that hung as if charred and withered; there was a head that sagged like a sack of ashes upon a meager body of blackness; and there were thin arms stretched out like knobby branches from a lightning-scorched tree. All of this was supported by a thick dark stalk which rose out of the earth and reached into the effigy like a hand into a puppet.

And even as that dull day was dimming into night, our vision was distracted by the profounder darkness of the thing which dangled so blackly in the dusk. Its composition appeared to be of the blackest earth, of earth that had gone stagnant somewhere in its depths, where a rich loam had festered into a bog of shadows. Soon we realized that each of us had fallen silent, entranced by a deep blackness which seemed to absorb our sight but which exposed nothing to scrutiny except an abyss in the outline of a man. Even when we ventured to lay our hands on that mass of darkness, we found only greater mysteries.

For there was almost no tangible aspect to it, merely a hint of material sensation, barely the feel of wind or water. It seemed to possess no more substance than a few shifting flames, but flames of only the slightest warmth, black flames that have curled together to take on the molten texture of spoiled fruit. And there was a vague sense of circulation, as though a kind of serpentine life swirled gently within. But no one could stand to keep his hold upon it for long before stepping suddenly away.

“Damn the thing, it’s not going to be rooted to my land,” said the old farmer.

Then he walked off toward the barn. And like the rest of us he was trying to rub something from the hand that had touched the shrivelled scarecrow, something that could not be seen.

He returned to us with an armory of axes, shovels, and other implements for uprooting what had grown upon his land, this eccentricity of the harvest. It would seem to have been a simple task: the ground was unusually soft all around the base of that black growth and its tenuous substance could hardly resist the wide blade of the farmer’s ax. But when the old man swung and tried to split the thing like a piece of firewood, the blade would not cleave. The ax entered and was closed upon, as if sunk within a viscous mire. The farmer pulled at the handle and managed to dislodge the ax, but he immediately let it fall from his hands. “It was pulling back on me,” he said in a low voice. “And you heard that sound.” Indeed, the sound which had haunted the area all that day—like innumerable insects laughing—did seem to rise in pitch and intensity when the thing was struck.

Without a word, we began digging up the earth where that thick black stalk was buried. We dug fairly deep before the approaching darkness forced us to abandon our efforts. Yet no matter how far down we burrowed, it was not far enough to reach the bottom of that sprouting blackness. Furthermore, our attempts became hindered by a perverse reluctance, as in the instance of someone who is hesitant to have a diseased part of his own body cut away in order to keep the disease from spreading.

It was nearly pitch dark when we finally walked away from that field, for the clouds of that day had lingered to hide the moon. In the blackness our voices whispered various strategies, so that we might yet accomplish what we had thereto failed in doing. We whispered, although none of us would have said why he did so.

The great shadow of a moonless night encompassed the landscape, preserving us from seeing the old farmer’s field and what was tenanted there. And yet so many of the houses in town were in vigil throughout those dark hours. Soft lights shone through curtained windows along the length of each street, where our trim wooden homes seemed as small as dollhouses

beneath the dark rustling depths of the season. Above the gathered roofs hovered the glass globes of streetlamps, like little moons set inside the dense leaves of elms and oaks and maples. Even in the night, the light shining through those leaves betrayed the festival of colors seething within them, blazing auras which had not faded with the passing days, a plague of colors that had already begun to infect our dreams. This prodigy had by then become connected in our minds with that field just outside of town and the strange growth which there had taken root.

Thus, a sense of urgency led us back to that place, where we found the old farmer waiting for us as the frigid aurora of dawn appeared above the distant woods. Our eyes scanned the frost-powdered earth and studied every space among shadows and corn shocks spread out over the land, searching for what was no longer present in the scene. “It’s gone back,” the farmer revealed to us. “Gone into the earth like something hiding in its shell. Don’t walk there,” he warned, pointing to the mouth of a wide pit.

We gathered about the edge of this opening in the ground, gazing into its depths. Even full daybreak did not show us the bottom of that dark well. Our speculations were brief and useless. Some of us picked up the shovels lying nearby, as if to begin the long duty of filling in the great aperture. “No use in that,” said the farmer. He then found a large stone and dropped it straight down the shaft. We waited and waited; we put our heads close to the hole and listened. But all we seemed to hear were remote, droning echoes, as of countless voices of insects chattering unseen. Finally, we

covered the hazardous pit with some boards and buried the makeshift enclosure under a mound of soft dirt.

“Maybe there’ll be some change in the spring,” someone said. But the old farmer only chuckled. “You mean when the ground warms up? Why do you think those leaves aren’t falling the way they should?”

It was not long after this troubling episode that our dreams, which formerly had been the merest shadows and glimpses, swelled into full phase. Yet they must not have been dreams entirely, but also

excavations into the season which had inspired them. In sleep we were consumed by the feverish life of the earth, cast among a ripe, fairly rotting

world of strange growth and transformation. We took a place within a darkly flourishing landscape where even the air was ripened into ruddy hues and everything wore the wrinkled grimace of decay, the mottled complexion of old flesh. The face of the land itself was knotted with so many other faces, ones that were corrupted by vile impulses. Grotesque expressions were molding themselves into the darkish grooves of ancient bark and the whorls of withered leaf; pulpy, misshapen features peered out of damp furrows; and the crisp skin of stalks and dead seeds split into a multitude of crooked smiles. All was a freakish mask painted with russet, rashy colors—colors that bled with a virulent intensity, so rich and vibrant that things trembled with their own ripeness. But despite this gross palpability, there remained something spectral at the heart of these dreams. It moved in shadow, a presence that was in the world of solid forms but not of it.

Nor did it belong to any other world that could be named, unless it was to that realm which is suggested to us by an autumn night when fields lay ragged in moonlight and some wild spirit has entered into things, a great aberration sprouting forth from a chasm of moist and fertile shadows, a hollow-eyed howling malignity rising to present itself to the cold emptiness of space and the pale gaze of the moon.

And it was to that moon we were forced to look for comfort when we awoke trembling in the night, overcome by the sense that another life was taking root within us, seeking its ultimate incarnation in the bodies we always dreamed were our own and inviting us into the depths of an

extraordinary harvest. Certainly there was some relief when we began to discover, after many insecure hints and delvings, that the dreams were not a sickness restricted to solitary individuals or families but in fact were epidemic throughout the community. No longer were we required to disguise our uneasiness as we met on the streets under the luxuriant shadows of trees that would not cast off their gaudy foliage, the mocking plumage of a strange season. We had become a race of eccentrics and openly declared an array of curious whims and suspicions, at least while daylight allowed this audacity.

Honored among us was that one old fellow, well known for his oddities, who had anticipated our troubles weeks beforehand. As he wandered about town, wheeling the blade-sharpening grindstone by which he earned his living, Mr. Marble had spoken of what he could

“read in the leaves”, as if those fluttering scraps of lush color were the pages of a secret book in which he perused gold and crimson hieroglyphs. “Just look at them,” he urged passersby, “bleeding their colors like that. They should be bled dry, but now they’re … making pictures. Something

inside trying to show itself. They're as dead as rags now, look at them all limp and flapping. But something's still in there. Those pictures, do you see them?"

Yes, we saw them, though somewhat belatedly. And they were not seen only in the chromatic designs of those deathless leaves. They could show themselves anywhere, if always briefly. Upon a cellar wall there might appear an ill-formed visage among the damp and fractured stones, a hideous impersonation of a face infiltrating the dark corners of our homes. Other faces, leprous masks, would arise within the grain of panelled walls or wooden floors, spying for a moment before sinking back into the knotty shadows, withdrawing below the surface. And there were so many nameless patterns that might spread themselves across the boards of an old fence or the side of a shed, engravings all tangled and wizened like a subterranean craze of roots and tendrils, an underworld riot of branching convolutions, gnarled ornamentations. Yet these designs were not unfamiliar to us … for in them we recognized the same outlines of autumnal decay that illuminated our dreams.

Like the old visionary who sharpened knives and axes and curving scythes, we too could now read the great book of countless colored leaves. But still he remained far in advance of what was happening deep within us all. For it was he who manifested certain idiosyncrasies of manner that would have later appeared in so many others, whether they lived in town or somewhere outside its limits. Of course, he had always set himself apart from us by his waywardness of speech, his willingness to utter pronouncements of dire or

delightful curiosity. To a child he might say: “The sight of the night can fly like a kite,” while someone older would be told: “Doesn’t have arms, but it knows how to use them. Doesn’t have a face, but it knows where to find one.”

Nevertheless, he plied his trade with every efficiency, pedalling the mechanism that turned the grindstone, expertly honing each blade and taking his pay like any man of business. Then, we noticed, he seemed to become distracted in his work. In a dull trance he touched metal implements to his spinning wheel of stone, careless of

the sparks that flew into his face. Yet there was also a wild luminousness in his eyes, as of a diamond-bright fever burning within him. Eventually we found ourselves unable to abide his company, though we now attributed this merely to some upsurge in his perennial strangeness rather than to a wholly unprecedented change in his behavior. It was not until he no longer appeared on the streets of town, or anywhere else, that we admitted our fears about him.

And these fears necessarily became linked to the other disruptions of that season, those extravagant omens which were gaining force all around us. The disappearance of Mr. Marble coincided with a new phenomenon, one that finally became apparent in the twilight of a certain day when all of the clustering and tenacious foliage seemed to exude a vague phosphorescence. By nightfall this prodigy was beyond skepticism. The multicolored leaves were softly glowing against the black sky, creating an untimely nocturnal rainbow which scattered its spectral tints everywhere and dyed the night with a harvest of hues: peach gold and pumpkin orange, honey yellow and winy amber, apple red and plum violet.

Luminous within their leafy shapes, the colors cast themselves across the darkness and were splattered upon our streets and our fields and our faces.

Everything was resplendent with the pyrotechnics of a new autumn.

That night we kept to our houses and watched at our windows. It was no marvel, then, that so many of us saw the one who wandered that iridescent eve, who joined in its outbursts and celebrations. Possessed by the ecstasies of a dark festival, he moved in a trance, bearing in his hand that great ceremonial knife whose keen edge flashed a thousand glittering dreams. He was seen standing alone beneath trees whose colors shined upon him, staining his face and his tattered clothes. He was seen standing alone in the yards of our houses, a rigid scarecrow concocted from a patchwork of colors and shadows. He was seen stalking slow and rhythmically beside high wooden fences that were now painted with a quivering colored glow. Finally, he was seen at a certain intersection of streets at the center of town; but now, as we saw, he was no longer alone.

Confronting him in the open night were two figures whom none of us knew: a young woman and, held tightly by her side, a small boy. We were not unaccustomed to strangers walking the streets of our town, or even stopping by one of the surrounding farms—people who were passing through, some momentarily lost. And it was not too late

in the evening for some travellers to appear, not really late at all. But they should not have been there, those two. Not on that night. Now they stood transfixed before a creature of whom they could have no conception, a thing that squeezed the knife in its hand the way the woman was now squeezing the small boy. We might have taken action but did not; we might have made an effort to help them. But the truth is that we wanted something to happen to them—we wanted to see them silenced. Such was our desire. Only then would we be sure that they could not tell what they knew. Our fear was not what those intruders might have learned about the trees that glowed so unnaturally in the night; or about the chittering noises that now began rising to a pitch of vicious laughter; or even about the farmer's field where a mound of dirt covered a bottomless hole. Our fear was what they might have known, what they must certainly have discovered, about us. And we lost all hope when we saw the quaking hand that could not raise the knife, the tortured face that could only stare while those two terrible victims—the rightful sacrifice!—ran off to safety, never to be seen by us again. After that we turned back to our houses, which now reeked of moldering shadows, and succumbed to a dreamless sleep.

Yet at daybreak it became evident that something had indeed happened during the night. The air was silent, everywhere the earth was cold. And the trees now stood bare of leaves, all of which lay dark and withered upon the ground, as if their strangely deferred dying had finally overtaken them in a sudden rage of mortification. Nor was it long before Mr. Marble was discovered by an old farmer.

The corpse reposed in a field, stretched face-down across a mound of dirt and alongside the remains of a dismantled scarecrow. When we turned over the body we saw that its staring eyes were as dull as that ashen autumn morning. We also saw that its left arm had been slashed by the knife held in its right hand.

Blood had flowed over the earth and blackened the flesh of the suicide. But those of us who handled that limp, nearly weightless body, dipping our fingers into the dark wound, found nothing at all that had the feeling of blood. We knew very well, of course, what that shadowy blackness did feel like; we knew what had found its way into the man before us, dragging him down into its savage world. His dreams had always reached much deeper than ours. So we buried him deep in a bottomless grave.

Nethescurial

I. *The Idol and the Island*

I have uncovered a rather wonderful manuscript, the letter began. It was an entirely fortuitous find, made during my day's dreary labors among some of the older and more decomposed remains entombed in the library archives. If I am any judge of antique documents, and of course I am, these brittle pages date back to the closing decades of the last century. (A more precise estimate of age will follow, along with a photocopy which I fear will not do justice to the delicate, crinkly script, nor to the greenish black discoloration the ink has taken on over the years.) Unfortunately there is no indication of authorship either within the manuscript itself or in the numerous and tedious papers whose company it has been keeping, none of which seem related to the item under discussion.

And what an item it is—a real storybook stranger in a crowd of documentary types, and probably destined to remain unknown.

I am almost certain that this invention, though at times it seems to pose as a letter or journal entry, has never appeared in common print. Given the bizarre nature of its content, I would surely have known of it before now. Although it is an untitled "statement" of sorts, the opening lines were more than enough to cause me to put everything else aside and seclude myself in a corner of the library stacks for the rest of the afternoon.

So it begins: "In the rooms of houses and beyond their walls— beneath dark waters and across moonlit skies—below earth mound and above mountain peak—in northern leaf and southern flower—inside each star and the voids between them—within blood and bone, through all souls and spirits—among the watchful winds of this and the several

worlds—behind the faces of the living and the dead …" And there it trails off, a quoted fragment of some more ancient text. But this is certainly not the last we will hear of this all-encompassing refrain!

As it happens, the above string of phrases is cited by the narrator in reference to a certain presence, more properly an omnipresence, which he encounters on an obscure island located at some unspecified northern latitude. Briefly, he has been summoned to this island, which appears on a local map under the name of Nethescurial, in order to rendezvous with another man, an archaeologist who is designated only as Dr. N— and who will come to know the narrator of the manuscript by the self-admitted alias of "Bartholomew Gray" (they don't call 'em like that anymore). Dr. N—, it seems, has been occupying himself upon that barren, remote, and otherwise uninhabited isle with some peculiar antiquarian rummagings. As Mr. Gray sails toward the island he observes the murky skies above him and the murky waters below. His prose style is somewhat plain for my taste, but it serves well enough once he approaches the island and takes surprisingly scrupulous notice of its eerie aspect: contorted rock formations; pointed pines and spruces of gigantic stature and uncanny movements; the masklike countenance of sea-facing cliffs; and a sickly, stagnant fog clinging to the landscape like a fungus.

From the moment Mr. Gray begins describing the island, a sudden enchantment enters into his account. It is that sinister enchantment which derives from a profound evil that is kept at just the right distance from us so that we may experience both our love and our fear of it in one sweeping sensation. Too close and we may be reminded of an omnipresent evil in the living world, and threatened with having our sleeping sense of doom awakened into full vigor. Too far away and we become even more incurious and complacent than is our usual state, and ultimately exasperated when an imaginary evil is so poorly evoked that it fails to offer the faintest echo of its real and all-pervasive counterpart. Of course, any number of locales may serve as the setting to reveal ominous truths; evil, beloved and menacing evil, may show itself anywhere precisely because it is everywhere and is as stunningly set off by a foil of sunshine and flowers as it is by darkness and dead leaves. A purely private quirk, nevertheless, sometimes allows the purest essence of life's malignity to be aroused only by sites such as the lonely island of Nethescurial, where the real and the unreal swirl freely and madly about in the same fog.

It seems that in this place, this far-flung realm, Dr. N— has discovered an ancient and long-sought artifact, a marginal but astonishing entry in that unspeakably voluminous journal of creation. Soon after landfall, Mr. Gray finds himself verifying the truth of the archaeologist's claims: that the island has been strangely molded in all its parts, and within its shores every manifestation of plant or mineral or anything whatever appears to have fallen at the mercy of some shaping force of demonic temperament, a genius loci which has sculpted its nightmares out of the atoms of the local earth. Closer inspection of this insular spot on the map serves to deepen the sense of evil and enchantment that had been lightly sketched earlier in the manuscript. But I refrain from further quotation (it is getting late and I want to wrap up this letter before bedtime) in order to cut straight through the epidermis of this tale and penetrate to its very bones and viscera. Indeed, the manuscript does seem to have an anatomy of its own, its dark green holography rippling over it like veins, and I regret that my paraphrase may not deliver it alive. Enough!

Mr. Gray makes his way inland, lugging along with him a fat little travelling bag. In a clearing he comes upon a large but unadorned, almost primitive house which stands against the fantastic backdrop of the island's wartlike hills and tumorous trees. The outside of the house is encrusted with the motley and leprous stones so abundant in the surrounding landscape. The inside of the house, which the visitor sees upon opening the unlocked door, is spacious as a cathedral but far less ornamented. The walls are white and smoothly surfaced; they also seem to taper inward, pyramid-like, as they rise from floor to lofty ceiling. There are no windows, and numerous oil lamps scattered about fill the interior of the house with a sacral glow. A figure descends a long staircase, crosses the great distance of the room, and solemnly greets his guest. At first wary of each other, they eventually achieve a degree of mutual ease and finally get down to their true business.

Thus far one can see that the drama enacted is a familiar one: the stage is rigidly traditional and the performers upon it are caught up in its style. For these actors are not so much people as they are puppets from the old shows, the ones that have told the same story for centuries, the ones that can still be very strange to us. Traipsing through the same old foggy scene, seeking the

same old isolated house, the puppets in these plays always find everything new and 147

unknown, because they have no memories to speak of and can hardly recall making these stilted motions countless times in the past. They struggle through the same gestures, repeat the same lines, although in rare moments they may feel a dim suspicion that this has all happened before. How like they are to the human race itself! This is what makes them our perfect representatives—this and the fact that they are handcarved in the image of maniacal victims who seek to share the secrets of their individual torments as their strings are manipulated by the same master.

The secrets which these two Punchinellos share are rather deviously presented by the author of this confession (for upon consideration this is the genre to which it truly belongs). Indeed, Mr. Gray, or whatever his name might be, appears to know much more than he is telling, especially with respect to his colleague the archaeologist. Nevertheless, he records what Dr. N—knows and, more importantly, what this avid excavator has found buried on the island. The thing is only a fragment of an object dating from antiquity. Known to be part of a religious idol, it is difficult to say which part. It is a twisted piece of a puzzle, one suggesting that the figure as a whole is intensely unbeautiful. The fragment is also darkened with the verdigris of centuries, causing its substance to resemble something like decomposing jade.

And were the other pieces of this idol also to be found on the same island? The answer is no. The idol seems to have been shattered ages ago, and each broken part of it buried in some remote place so that the whole of it might not easily be joined together again. Although it was a mere representation, the effigy itself was the focus of a great power. The ancient sect which was formed to worship this power seem to have been pantheists of a sort, believing that all created things— appearances to the contrary—are of a single, unified, and transcendent stuff, an emanation of a central creative force. Hence the ritual chant which runs “in the rooms of houses”, et cetera, and alludes to the all-present nature of this deity—a most primal and pervasive type of god, one that falls into the category of “gods who eclipse all others”, territorialist divinities whose claim to the creation purportedly

supersedes that of their rivals. (The words of the famous chant, by the way, are the only ones to come down to us from the ancient cult and appeared for the first time in an ethnographical, quasi-esoteric work entitled Illuminations of the Ancient World, which was published in the

latter part of the nineteenth century, around the same time, I would guess, as this manuscript I am rushing to summarize was written.) At some point in their career as worshipants of the "Great One God", a shadow fell upon the sect. It appears that one day it was revealed to them, in a manner both obscure and hideous, that the power to which they bowed was essentially evil in character and that their religious mode of pantheism was in truth a kind of pandemonism.

But this revelation was not a surprise to all of the sectarians, since there seems to have been an internecine struggle which ended in slaughter. In any case, the anti-demonists prevailed, and they immediately rechristened their ex-deity to reflect its newly discovered essence in evil. And the name by which they henceforth called it was Nethescurial.

A nice turn of affairs: this obscure island openly advertizes itself as the home of the idol of Nethescurial. Of course, this island is only one of several to which the pieces of the vandalized totem were scattered. The original members of the sect who had treacherously turned against their god knew that the power concentrated in the effigy could not be destroyed, and so they decided to parcel it out to isolated corners of the earth where it could do the least harm. But would they have brought attention to this fact by allowing these widely disseminated burial plots to bear the name of the pandemoniacal god? This is doubtful, just as it is equally unlikely that it was they who built those crude houses, temples of a fashion, to mark the spot where a particular shard of the old idol might be located by others.

So Dr. N— is forced to postulate a survival of the demonist faction of the sect, a cult that had devoted itself to searching out those places which had been transformed by the presence of the idol and might thus be known by their gruesome features. This quest would require a great deal of time and effort for its completion, given the global reaches where those splinters of

evil might be tucked away. Known as the “seeking”, it also involved the enlistment of outsiders, who in latter days were often researchers into the ways of bygone cultures, though they remained ignorant that the cause they served was still a living one. Dr. N— therefore warns his “colleague, Mr. Gray”, that they may be in danger from those who carried on the effort to reassemble the idol and revive its power. The very presence of that great and crude house on the island certainly proved that the cult was already aware of the location of this fragment of the idol. In fact, the mysterious Mr. Gray, not unexpectedly, is actually a member of the

cult in its modern incarnation; furthermore, he has brought with him to the island—bulky travelling bag, you know—all the other pieces of the idol, which have been recovered through centuries of seeking. Now he only needs the one piece discovered by Dr. N— to make the idol whole again for the first time in a couple millenia.

But he also needs the archaeologist himself as a kind of sacrifice to Nethescurial, a ceremony which takes place later the same night in the upper part of the house. If I may telescope the ending for brevity’s sake, the sacrificial ritual holds some horrific surprises for Mr. Gray (these people seem never to realize what they are getting themselves into), who soon repents of his evil practices and is driven to smash the idol to pieces once more. Making his escape from that weird island, he throws these pieces overboard, sowing the cold gray waters with the scraps of an incredible power. Later, fearing an obscure threat to his existence (perhaps the reprisal of his fellow cultists), he composes an account of a horror which is both his own and that of the whole human race.

End of manuscript.

Now, despite my penchant for such wild yarns as I have just attempted to describe, I am not oblivious to their shortcomings. For one thing, whatever emotional impact the narrative may have lost in the foregoing precis, it certainly gained in coherence: the incidents in the manuscript are clumsily developed, important details lack proper emphasis, impossible things are thrown at the reader without any real effort at persuasion of their veracity. I

do admire the fantastic principle at the core of this piece. The nature of that pandemoniac entity is very intriguing. Imagine all of creation as a mere mask for the foulest evil, an absolute evil whose reality is mitigated only by our blindness to it, an evil at the heart of things, existing “inside each star and the voids between them—within blood and bone—through all souls and spirits”, and so forth. There is even a reference in the manuscript that suggests an analogy between Nethescurial and that beautiful myth of the Australian aborigines known as the Alchera (the Dreamtime, or Dreaming), a super-reality which is the source of all we see in the world around us. (And this reference will be useful in dating

Except for the concluding lines, which reveal the somewhat extravagant, but not entirely uninteresting, conclusion of the narrator himself.

the manuscript, since it was toward the end of the last century that Australian anthropologists made the aboriginal cosmology known to the general public.) Imagine the universe as the dream, the feverish nightmare of a demonic demiurge.

O Supreme Nethescurial!

The problem is that such supernatural inventions are indeed quite difficult to imagine. So often they fail to materialize in the mind, to take on a mental texture, and thus remain unfelt as anything but an abstract monster of metaphysics—an elegant or awkward schematic that cannot rise from the paper to touch us. Of course, we do need to keep a certain distance from such specters as Nethescurial, but this is usually provided by the medium of words as such, which ensnare all kinds of fantastic creatures before they can tear us body and soul.

(And yet the words of this particular manuscript seem rather weak in this regard, possibly because they are only the drab green scratchings of a human hand and not the heavy mesh of black type.) But we do want to get close enough to feel the foul breath of these beasts, or to see them as prehistoric leviathans circling about the tiny island on which we have taken refuge. Even if we are incapable of a sincere belief in ancient cults and their

unheard of idols, even if these pseudonymous adventurers and archaeologists appear to be mere shadows on a wall, and even if strange houses on remote islands are of shaky construction, there may still be a power in these things that threatens us like a bad dream. And this power emanates not so much from within the tale as it does from somewhere behind it, someplace of infinite darkness and ubiquitous evil in which we may walk unaware.

But never mind these night thoughts; it's only to bed that I will walk after closing this letter.

Nethescurial

II. *Postscript*

Later the same night.

Several hours have passed since I set down the above description and analysis of that manuscript. How naive those words of mine now sound to me. And yet they are still true enough, from a certain perspective. But that perspective was a privileged one which, at least for the moment, I do not enjoy. The distance between me and a devastating evil has lessened considerably. I no longer find it so difficult to imagine the horrors delineated in that manuscript, for I 151

have known them in the most intimate way. What a fool I seem to myself for playing with such visions. How easily a simple dream can destroy one's sense of safety, if only for a few turbulent hours. Certainly I have experienced all this before, but never as acutely as tonight.

I had not been asleep for long but apparently long enough. At the start of the dream I was sitting at a desk in a very dark room. It also seemed to me that the room was very large, though I could see little of it beyond the area of the desktop, at either end of which glowed a lamp of some kind. Spread out before me were many papers varying in size. These I knew to be maps of one sort or another, and I was studying them each in turn. I had become quite absorbed in these maps, which now dominated the dream to the exclusion of all other images.

Each of them focused on some concatenation of islands without reference to larger, more familiar land masses. A powerful impression of remoteness and seclusion was conveyed by these irregular daubs of earth fixed in bodies of water that were unnamed. But although the location of the islands was not specific, somehow I was sure that those for whom the maps were meant already had this knowledge. Nevertheless, this secrecy was only superficial, for no esoteric key was required to seek out the greater geography of which these maps were an exaggerated detail: they were all distinguished by some known language in which the islands were named, different languages for

different maps. Yet upon closer view (indeed, I felt as if I were actually journeying among those exotic fragments of land, tiny pieces of shattered mystery), I saw that every map had one thing in common: within each group of islands, whatever language was used to name them, there was always one called Nethescurial. It was as if all over the world this terrible name had been insinuated into diverse locales as the only one suitable for a certain island. Of course there were variant cognate forms and spellings, sometimes transliterations, of the word. (How precisely I saw them!) Still, with the strange conviction that may overcome a dreamer, I knew these places had all been claimed in the name of Nethescurial and that they bore the unique sign of something which had been buried there—the pieces of that dismembered idol.

And with this thought, the dream reshaped itself. The maps dissolved into a kind of mist; the desk before me became something else, an altar of coarse stone, and the two lamps upon it flared up to

reveal a strange object now positioned between them. So many visions in the dream were piercingly clear, but this dark object was not. My impression was that it was conglomerate in form, suggesting a monstrous whole. At the same time these outlines which alluded to both man and beast, flower and insect, reptiles, stones, and countless things I could not even name, all seemed to be changing, mingling in a thousand ways that prevented any sensible image of the idol.

With the upsurge in illumination offered by the lamps, I could see that the room was truly of unusual dimensions. The four enormous walls slanted toward one another and joined at a point high above the floor, giving the space around me the shape of a perfect pyramid. But I now saw things from an oddly remote perspective: the altar with its idol stood in the middle of the room and I was some distance away, or perhaps not even in the scene. Then, from some dark corner or secret door, there emerged a file of figures walking slowly toward the altar and finally congregating in a half-circle before it. I could see that they were all quite skeletal in shape, for they were identically dressed in a black material which clung tightly to their bodies and made them look like skinny shadows. They seemed to be actually

bound in blackness from head to foot, with only their faces exposed. But they were not, in fact, faces—they were pale, expressionless, and identical masks. The masks were without openings and bestowed upon their wearers a terrible anonymity, an ancient anonymity. Behind these smooth and barely contoured faces were spirits beyond all hope or consolation except in the evil to which they would willingly abandon themselves.

Yet this abandonment was a highly selective process, a ceremony of the chosen.

One of the white-faced shadows stepped forward from the group, seemingly drawn forth into the proximity of the idol. The figure stood motionless, while from within its dark body something began to drift out like luminous smoke. It floated, swirling gently, toward the idol and there was absorbed. And I knew—for was this not my own dream?—that the idol and its sacrifice were becoming one within each other. This spectacle continued until nothing of the glowing, ectoplasmic haze remained to be extracted, and the figure—now shrunken to the size of a marionette—collapsed. But soon it was being lifted, rather tenderly, by another from the group who placed the dwarfish form upon the altar and, taking up a knife, carved deep into the body, making no sound. Then something oozed upon the altar,

something thick and oily and strangely colored, darkly colored though not with any of the shades of blood. Although the strangeness of this color was more an idea than a matter of vision, it began to fill the dream and to determine the final stage of its development.

Quite abruptly, that closed, cavernous room dissolved into an open stretch of land: open yet also cluttered with a bric-a-brac topography whose crazed shapes were all of that single and sinister color. The ground was as if covered with an ancient, darkened mold and the things rising up from it were the same.

Surrounding me was a landscape that might once have been of stone and earth and trees (such was my impression) but had been transformed entirely into something like petrified slime. I gazed upon it spreading before me,

twisting in the way of wrought iron tracery or great overgrown gardens of writhing coral, an intricate latticework of hardened mulch whose surface was overrun with a chaos of little carvings, scabby designs that suggested a world of demonic faces and forms. And it was all composed in that color which somehow makes me think of rotted lichen. But before I exited in panic from my dream, there was one further occurrence of this color: the inkish waters washing upon the shores of the island around me.

As I wrote a few pages ago, I have been awake for some hours now. What I did not mention was the state in which I found myself after waking. Throughout the dream, and particularly in those last moments when I positively identified that foul place, there was an unseen presence, something I could feel was circulating within all things and unifying them in an infinitely extensive body of evil. I suppose it is nothing unusual that I continued to be under this visionary spell even after I left my bed. I tried to invoke the gods of the ordinary world—

calling them with the whistle of a coffee pot and praying before their icon of the electric light—but they were too weak to deliver me from that other whose name I can no longer bring myself to write. It seemed to be in possession of my house, of every common object inside and the whole of the dark world outside.

Yes—lurking among the watchful winds of this and the several worlds. Everything seemed to be a manifestation of this evil and to my eyes was taking on its aspect. I could feel it also emerging in myself, growing stronger behind this living face that I am afraid to confront in the mirror.

Nevertheless, these dream-induced illusions now seem to be abating, perhaps driven off by my writing about them. Like someone 154

who has had too much to drink the night before and swears off liquor for life, I have forsworn any further indulgence in weird reading matter. No doubt this is only a temporary vow, and soon enough my old habits will return. But certainly not before morning!

Nethescurial

III. *The Puppets in the Park*

Some days later, and quite late at night.

Well, it seems this letter has mutated into a chronicle of my adventures Nethescurialian. See, I can now write that unique nomen with ease; furthermore, I feel almost no apprehension in stepping up to my mirror. Soon I may even be able to sleep in the way I once did, without visionary intrusions of any kind.

No denying that my experiences of late have tipped the scales of the strange. I found myself just walking restlessly about—impossible to work, you know—and always carrying with me this heavy dread in my solar plexus, as if I had feasted at a banquet of fear and the meal would not digest. Most strange, since I have been loath to take nourishment during this time. How could I put anything into my mouth, when everything looked the way it did? Hard enough to touch a doorknob or a pair of shoes, even with the protection of the gloves. I could feel every damn thing squirming, not excluding my own flesh. And I could also see what was squirming beneath every surface, my vision penetrating through the usual armor of objects and discerning the same gushing stuff inside whatever I looked upon.

It was that dark color from the dream, I could identify it clearly now. Dark and greenish. How could I possibly feed myself? How could I even bring myself to settle very long in one spot? So I kept on the move. And I tried not to look too closely at how everything, everything was crawling within itself and making all kinds of shapes inside there, making all kinds of faces at me. (Yet it was really all the same face, everything gorged with that same creeping stuff.) There were also sounds that I heard, voices speaking vague words, voices that came not from the mouths of the people I passed on the street but from the very bottom of their brains, garbled whisperings at first and then so clear, so eloquent.

This rising wave of chaos reached its culmination tonight and then came crashing down. But my timely maneuvering, I trust, has put everything right

again.

Here, now, are the terminal events of this nightmare as they 155

occurred. (And how I wish I were not speaking figuratively, that I was in fact only in the world of dreams or back in the pages of books and old manuscripts.) This conclusion had its beginning in the park, a place that is actually some distance from my home, so far had I wandered. It was already late at night, but I was still walking about, treading the narrow asphalt path that winds through that island of grass and trees in the middle of the city. (And somehow it seemed I had already walked in this same place on this same night, that this had all happened to me before.) The path was lit by globes of light balanced upon slim metal poles; another glowing orb was set in the great blackness above. Off the path the grass was darkened by shadows, and the trees swishing overhead were the same color of muddied green.

After walking some indefinite time along some indefinite route, I came upon a clearing where an audience had assembled for some late-night entertainment.

Strings of colored lights had been hung around the perimeter of this area and rows of benches had been set up. The people seated on these benches were all watching a tall, illuminated booth. It was the kind of booth used for puppet shows, with wild designs painted across the lower part and a curtained opening at the top. The curtains were now drawn back and two clownish creatures were twisting about in a glary light which emanated from inside the booth. They leaned and squawked and awkwardly batted each other with soft paddles they were hugging in their soft little arms. Suddenly they froze at the height of their battle; slowly they turned about and faced the audience. It seemed the puppets were looking directly at the place I was standing behind the last row of benches. Their misshapen heads tilted, and their glassy eyes stared straight into mine.

Then I noticed that the others were doing the same: all of them had turned around on the benches and, with expressionless faces and dead puppet eyes, held me to the spot. Although their mouths did move, they were not silent. But the voices I heard were far more numerous than was the gathering

before me. These were the voices I had been hearing as they chanted confused words in the depths of everyone's thoughts, fathoms below the level of their awareness. The words still sounded hushed and slow, monotonous phrases mingling like the sequences of a fugue. But now I could understand these words, even as more voices picked up the chant at different points and

overlapped one another, saying, "In the rooms of houses … across moonlit skies … through all souls and spirits… behind the faces of the living and the dead."

I find it impossible to say how long it was before I was able to move, before I backed up toward the path, all those multitudinous voices chanting everywhere around me and all those many-colored lights bobbing in the wind-blown trees. Yet it seemed only a single voice I heard, and a single color I saw, as I found my way home, stumbling through the greenish darkness of the night.

I knew what needed to be done. Gathering up some old boards from my basement, I piled them into the fireplace and opened the flue. As soon as they were burning brightly, I added one more thing to the fire: a manuscript whose ink was of a certain color. Blessed with a saving vision, I could now see whose signature was on that manuscript, whose hand had really written those pages and had been hiding in them for a hundred years. The author of that narrative had broken up the idol and drowned it in deep waters, but the stain of its ancient patina had stayed upon him. It had invaded the author's crabbed script of blackish green and survived there, waiting to crawl into another lost soul who failed to see what dark places he was wandering into. How I knew this to be true! And has this not been proved by the color of the smoke that rose from the burning manuscript, and keeps rising from it?

I am writing these words as I sit before the fireplace. But the flames have gone out and still the smoke from the charred paper hovers within the hearth, refusing to ascend the chimney and disperse itself into the night. Perhaps the chimney has become blocked. Yes, this must be the case, this must be true. Those other things are lies, illusions. That mold-colored

smoke has not taken on the shape of the idol, the shape that cannot be seen steadily and whole but keeps turning out so many arms and heads, so many eyes, and then pulling them back in and bringing them out again in other configurations. That shape is not drawing something out of me and putting something else in its place, something that seems to be bleeding into the words as I write. And my pen is not growing bigger in my hand, nor is my hand growing smaller, smaller …

See, there is no shape in the fireplace. The smoke is gone, gone up the chimney and out into the sky. And there is nothing in the sky, nothing I can see through the window. There is the moon, of course,

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high and round. But no shadow falls across the moon, no churning chaos of smoke that chokes the frail order of the earth, no shifting cloud of nightmares enveloping moons and suns and stars. It is not a squirming, creeping, smearing shape I see upon the moon, not the shape of a great deformed crab scuttling out of the black oceans of infinity and invading the island of the moon, crawling with its innumerable bodies upon all the spinning islands of inky space. That shape is not the cancerous totality of all creatures, not the oozing ichor that flows within all things. Nethescurial is not the secret name of the creation. It is not in the rooms of houses and beyond their walls … beneath dark waters and across moonlit skies … below earth mound and above mountain peak … in northern leaf and southern flower … inside each star and the voids between them … within blood and bone, through all souls and spirits… among the watchful winds of this and the several worlds … behind the faces of the living and the dead. I am not dying in a nightmare.

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The Shadow At the Bottom of the World

The Cocoons

Early one morning, hours before sunrise, I was awakened by Dr. Dublanc. He was standing at the foot of my bed, lightly tugging on the covers. For a moment I was convinced, in my quasi-somnolent state, that a small animal was prancing about on the mattress, performing some nocturnal ritual unknown to higher forms of life. Then I saw a gloved hand twitching in the glow of the streetlight outside my window. Finally I identified the silhouette, shaped by a hat and overcoat, of Dr. Dublanc.

I switched on the bedside lamp and sat up to face the well-known intruder.

“What’s wrong?” I asked as if in protest.

“My apologies,” he said in a polite yet unapologetic tone. “There is someone I want you to meet. I think it might be beneficial for you.”

“If that’s what you say. But can’t it wait? I haven’t been sleeping well as it is. Better than anyone you should know that.”

“Of course I know. I also know other things,” he asserted, betraying his annoyance. “The gentleman I want to introduce to you will be leaving the country very soon, so there is a question of timing.”

“All the same …”

“Yes, I know—your nervous condition. Here, take these.” Dr. Dublanc placed two egg-shaped pills in the palm of my hand. I put them to my lips and then swallowed a half-glass of water that was on the nightstand. I set down the empty glass next to my alarm clock, which emitted a soft grinding noise due to some unknown mutations of its internal mechanism. My eyes became fixed by the slow even movement of the second hand, but Dr. Dublanc, in a quietly urgent voice, brought me out of my trance.

“We should really be going. I have a taxi waiting outside.”

So I hurried, thinking that I would end up being charged for this excursion, cab fare and all.

Dr. Dublanc had left the taxi standing in the alley behind my apartment building. Its headlights beamed rather weakly in the blackness, scarcely guiding us as we approached the vehicle. Side by side, the doctor and I proceeded over uneven pavement and through blotched vapors emerging from the fumaroles of several sewer covers. But I could see the moon shining between the close rooftops, and I thought that it subtly shifted phases before my eyes, bloating a bit into fullness. The doctor caught me staring.

“It’s not going haywire up there, if that’s what is bothering you.”

“But it seemed to be changing.”

With a growl of exasperation, the doctor pulled me after him into the cab.

The driver appeared to have been stilled into a state of dormancy. Yet Dr.

Dublanc was able to evoke a response when he called out an address to the hack, who turned his thin rodent face toward the back seat and glared briefly. For a time we sat in silence as the taxi proceeded through a monotonous passage of unpeopled avenues. At that hour the world on the other side of my window seemed to be no more than a mass of shadows wavering at a great distance. The doctor touched my arm and said, “Don’t worry if the pills I gave you seem to have no immediate effect.”

“I trust your judgement,” I said, only to receive a doubtful glance from the doctor. In order to revive my credibility, I told him what was actually on my mind: the matter of who I would be meeting, and why.

“A former patient of mine,” he answered bluntly, for it was apparent that at this point he was prepared to assume an open manner with me. “Not to say that some unfortunate aspects do not still exist in his case. For certain reasons I will be introducing him to you as ‘Mr. Catch’, though he’s also a doctor of sorts—a brilliant scientist, in fact. But what I want you to see are just some films he has made in the course of his work. They are quite

remarkable. Not to deny those unfortunate aspects I mentioned… yet very intriguing. And possibly beneficial—to you, I mean. Possibly most beneficial. And that's all I can say at the moment."

I nodded as if in comprehension of this disclosure. Then I noticed how far we had gone, almost to the opposite end of the city, if that was possible in what seemed a relatively short period of time. (I had 160

forgotten to wear my watch, and this negligence somewhat aggravated my lack of orientation.) The district in which we were now travelling was of the lowest order, a landscape without pattern or substance, especially as I viewed it by moonlight.

There might be an open field heaped with debris, a devastated plain where bits of glass and scraps of metal glittered, though perhaps a solitary house remained in this wasteland, an empty skeletal structure scraped of its flesh. And then, turning a corner, one left behind this lunar spaciousness and entered a densely tangled nest of houses, the dwarfish and the great all tightly nestled together and all eaten away, disfigured. Even as I watched them through the taxi's windows they appeared to be carrying on their corruption, mutating in the dull light of the moon. Roofs and chimneys elongated toward the stars, dark bricks multiplied and bulged like tumors upon the facades of houses, entire streets twisted themselves along some unearthly design. Although a few windows were filled with light, however sickly, the only human being I saw was a derelict crumpled at the base of a traffic sign.

"Sorry, doctor, but this may be too much."

"Just hold on to yourself," he said, "we're almost there. Driver, pull into that alley behind those houses."

The taxi joggled as we made our way through the narrow passage. On either side of us were high wooden fences beyond which rose so many houses of such impressive height and bulk, though of course they were still monuments to decay.

The cab's headlights were barely up to the task of illuminating the cramped little alley, which seemed to become ever narrower the further we proceeded.

Suddenly the driver jerked us to a stop to avoid running over an old man slouched against the fence, an empty bottle lying at his side.

"This is where we get out," said Dr. Dublanc. "Wait here for us, driver."

As we emerged from the taxi I pulled at the doctor's sleeve, whispering about the expense of the fare. He replied in a loud voice, "You should worry more about getting a taxi to take us back home. They keep their distance from this neighborhood and rarely answer the calls they receive to come in here. Isn't that true, driver?" But the man had returned to that dormant state in which I first saw him. "Come on," said the doctor. "He'll wait for us. This way."

Dr. Dublanc pushed back a section of the fence that formed a 161

kind of loosely hinged gate, closing it carefully behind us after we passed through the opening. On the other side was a small backyard, actually a miniature dumping ground where shadows bulged with refuse. And before us, I assumed, stood the house of Mr. Catch. It seemed very large, with an incredible number of bony peaks and dormers outlined against the sky, and even a weathervane in some vague animal-shape that stood atop a ruined turret grazed by moonlight. But although the moon was as bright as before, it appeared to be considerably thinner, as if it had been worn down just like everything else in that neighborhood.

"It hasn't altered in the least," the doctor assured me. He was holding open the back door of the house and gesturing for me to approach.

"Perhaps no one's home," I suggested.

"Not at all—the door's unlocked. You see how he's expecting us?"

"There don't appear to be any lights in use."

“Mr. Catch likes to conserve on certain expenses. A minor mania of his. But in other ways he’s quite extravagant. And by no means is he a poor man. Watch yourself on the porch—some of these boards are not what they once were.”

As soon as I was standing by the doctor’s side he removed a flashlight from the pocket of his overcoat, shining a path into the dark interior of the house. Once inside, that yellowish swatch of illumination began flitting around in the blackness. It settled briefly in a cobwebbed corner of the ceiling, then ran down a blank battered wall and jittered along warped floor moldings. For a moment it revealed two suitcases, quite well used, at the bottom of a stairway.

It slid smoothly up the stairway banister and flew straight to the floors above, where we heard some scraping sounds, as if an animal with long-nailed paws was moving about.

“Does Mr. Catch keep a pet?” I asked in a low voice.

“Why shouldn’t he? But I don’t think we’ll find him up there.”

We went deeper into the house, passing through many rooms which fortunately were unobstructed by furniture. Sometimes we crushed bits of broken glass underfoot; once I inadvertently kicked an empty bottle and sent it clanging across a bare floor. Reaching the far side of the house, we entered a long hallway flanked by several doors. All of them were closed and behind some of them we heard sounds similar to those being made on the second floor. We also heard 162

footsteps slowly ascending a stairway. Then the last door at the end of the hallway opened, and a watery light pushed back some of the shadows ahead of us.

A round-bodied little man was standing in the light, lazily beckoning to us.

“You’re late, you’re very late,” he chided while leading us down into the cellar. His voice was highpitched yet also quite raspy. “I was just about to leave.”

“My apologies,” said Dr. Dublanc, who sounded entirely sincere on this occasion.

“Mr. Catch, allow me to introduce—”

“Never mind that Mr. Catch nonsense. You know well enough what things are like for me, don’t you, doctor? So let’s get started, I’m on a schedule now.”

In the cellar we paused amid the quivering light of candles, dozens of them positioned high and low, melting upon a shelf or an old crate or right on the filth-covered floor. Even so, there was a certain lack of definition among the surrounding objects, but I could see that an old-fashioned film projector had been set up on a table toward the center of the room, and a portable movie screen stood by the opposite wall. The projector was plugged into what appeared to be a small electrical generator humming on the floor.

“I think there are some stools or whatnot you can sit on,” said Mr. Catch as he threaded the film around the spools of the projector. Then for the first time he spoke to me directly. “I’m not sure how much the doctor has explained about what I’m going to show you. Probably very little.”

“Yes, and deliberately so,” interrupted Dr. Dublanc. “If you just roll the film I think my purpose will be served, with or without explanations. What harm can it do?”

Mr. Catch made no reply. After blowing out some of the candles to darken the room sufficiently, he switched on the projector, which was a rather noisy mechanism. I worried that whatever dialogue or narration the film might contain would be drowned out between the whirring of the projector and the humming of the generator. But I soon realized that this was a silent film, a cinematic document that in every aspect of its production was thoroughly primitive, from its harsh light and coarse photographic texture to its nearly unintelligible scenario.

It seemed to serve as a visual record of scientific experiment, a laboratory demonstration in fact. The setting, nevertheless, was 163

anything but clinical—a bare wall in a cellar which in some ways resembled, yet was not identical to, the one where I was viewing this film. And the subject was human: a shabby, unshaven, and unconscious derelict who had been propped up against a crude grayish wall. Not too many moments passed before the man began to stir. But his movements were not those of awakening from a deep stupor; they were only spasmodic twitchings of some energy which appeared to inhabit the old tramp. A torn pant leg wiggled for a second, then his chest heaved, as if with an incredible sigh. His left arm, no his right arm, flewup in the air and immediately collapsed. Soon his head began to wobble and it kept on wobbling, even though its owner remained in a state of profound obliviousness.

Something was making its way through the derelict's scalp, rustling among the long greasy locks of an unsightly head. Part of it finally poked upwards —a thin sticklike thing. More of them emerged, dark wiry appendages that were bristling and bending and reaching for the outer world. At the end of each was a pair of slender snapping pincers. What ultimately broke through that shattered skull, pulling itself out with a wriggling motion of its many newborn arms, was approximately the size and proportions of a spider monkey. It had tiny translucent wings which fluttered a few times, glistening but useless, and was quite black, as if charred. Actually the creature seemed to be in an emaciated condition. When it turned its head toward the camera, it stared into the lens with malicious eyes and seemed to be chattering with its beaked mouth.

I whispered to Dr. Dublanc: "Please, I'm afraid that—"

"Exactly," he hissed back at me. "You are always afraid of the least upset in the order of things. You need to face certain realities so that you may free yourself of them."

Now it was my turn to give the doctor a skeptical glance. Yet I certainly realized that he was practicing something other than facile therapeutics. And even then our presence in that cellar—that cold swamp of shadows in which candles flickered like fireflies—seemed to be as much for Dr. Dublanc's benefit as it was for mine, if "benefit" is the proper word in this case.

“Those pills you gave me …”

“Shhh. Watch the film.”

It was almost finished. After the creature had hatched from its strange egg, it proceeded very rapidly to consume the grubby derelict, 164

leaving only a collection of bones attired in cast-off clothes. Picked perfectly clean, the skull leaned wearily to one side. And the creature, which earlier had been so emaciated, had grown rather plump with its feast, becoming bloated and meaty like an overfed dog. In the final sequence, a net was tossed into the scene, capturing the gigantic vermin and dragging it off camera. Then whiteness filled the screen and the film was flapping on its reel.

“Apparently Mr. Catch has left us,” said the doctor, noticing that I remained under the spell of what I had just seen. Taking advantage of the moment, he tried to lend a certain focus or coloration to this experience. “You must understand,” he continued, “that the integrity of material forms is only a prejudice, at most a point of view. This is not to mention the substance of those forms, which is an even more dubious state of affairs. That the so-called anatomy of a human being might burst forth as a fantastic insect should be no cause for consternation. I know that it may seem that in the past I’ve attempted to actually bolster your prejudices about a clockwork world of sunrise schedules and lunar routines. But this insistence has only had a paradoxical effect, just like certain drugs that in some people induce a reaction quite the opposite of the norm. All of my assurances have made you more confirmed in your suspicions that things are not bolted down, so to speak. And no more is that thing which we call the mind. We can both learn a great deal from Mr. Catch. Of course, I still recognize that there remain some unfortunate aspects to his case— there was only so much I could do for him—but nonetheless I think that he has gained rare and invaluable knowledge, the consequences notwithstanding.

“His research had taken him into areas where, how should I say, where the shapes and levels of phenomena, the multiple planes of natural existence, revealed their ability to establish new relationships with one another … to become interconnected, as it were, in ways that were never apparent. At

some point everything became a blur for him, a sort of pandemonium of forces, a phantasmagoria of possibilities which he eagerly engaged. We can have no idea of the tastes and temptations that may emerge or develop in the course of such work … a curious hedonism that could not be controlled. Oh, the vagaries of omnipotence, breeder of indulgence. Well, Mr. Catch retreated in panic from his own powers, yet he could not put the pieces back as they had been: unheard of habits and responses had already ingrained

themselves into his system, seemingly forever. The worst sort of slavery, no doubt, but how persuasively he spoke of the euphorias he had known, the infinitely diverse sensations beyond all common understanding. It was just this understanding that I required in order to free him of a life that, in its own fashion, had become as abysmal and problematic as your own—except he is at the opposite pole. Some middle ground must be established, some balance. How well I understand that now! This is why I have brought you two together. This is the only reason, however it may seem to you."

"It seems to me," I replied, "that Mr. Catch is no longer available."

Dr. Dublanc emitted the shadow of a laugh. "Oh, he's still in the house. You can be sure of that. Let's take a look upstairs."

He was, in fact, not far at all. Stepping into that hallway of closed doors at the top of the cellar stairs, we saw that one of those doors was now partially open and the room beyond it was faintly aglow. Without announcing us, Dr.

Dublanc slowly pushed back the door until we could both see what had happened inside.

It was a small unfurnished room with a bare wooden floor upon which a candle had been fixed with its own drippings. The candlelight shone dimly on the full face of Mr. Catch, who seemed to have collapsed in a back corner of the room, lying somewhat askew. He was sweating, though it was cold in the room, and his eyes were half-closed in a kind of languorous exhaustion. But something was wrong with his mouth: it seemed to be muddied and enlarged, sloppily painted into a clown's oversized grin. On

the floor beside him were, to all appearances, the freshly ravaged remains of one of those creatures in the film.

“You made me wait too long!” he suddenly shouted, opening his eyes fully and straightening himself up for a moment before his posture crumbled once again. He then repeated this outburst: “You couldn’t help me and now you make me wait too long.”

“It was in order to help you that I came here,” the doctor said to him, yet all the time fixing his eyes on the mutilated carcass on the floor. When he saw that I had observed his greedy stare he regained himself. “I’m trying to help both of you the only way you can be helped. Show him, Mr. Catch, show him how you breed those amazing individuals.”

Mr. Catch groped in his pants pocket, pulled out a large handkerchief, and wiped off his mouth. He was smiling a little idiotically, as 166

if intoxicated, and worked himself to his feet. His body now seemed even more swollen and bulbous than before, really not quite human in its proportions.

After replacing his handkerchief in one pocket, he reached down into the other, feeling around for some moments. “It’s so simple,” he explained in a voice that had become placid. And it was with a kind of giddy pride that he finally said, “Oh, here they are,” and held out his open hand toward me. In the thick pad of his palm I could see two tiny objects that were shaped like eggs.

I turned abruptly to the doctor. “The pills you gave me.”

“It was the only thing that could be done for you. I’ve tried so hard to help you both.”

“I had a suspicion,” said Mr. Catch, now reviving himself from his stupefaction.

“I should never have brought you into this. Don’t you realize that it’s difficult enough without involving your own patients. The derelicts are one

thing, but this is quite another. Well, my suitcases are packed. It's your operation now, doctor. Let me by, time to go."

Mr. Catch maneuvered himself from the room, and a few moments later the sound of a door being slammed echoed throughout the house. The doctor kept close watch on me, waiting for some reaction, I suppose. Yet he was also listening very intently to certain sounds emanating from the rooms around us. The noise of restless skittering was everywhere.

"You understand, don't you?" asked the doctor. "Mr. Catch isn't the only one who has waited too long… far too long. I thought by now the pills would have had their effect."

I went into my pocket and removed the two little eggs which I had failed to swallow earlier. "I can't claim that I ever had much faith in your methods," I said. Then I tossed the pills at Dr. Dublanc who, speechless, caught them. "You won't mind if I return home by myself."

Indeed, he was relieved to see me go. As I traced my way back through the house I heard him running about and opening door after door, saying, "There you are, you beauties. There you are."

Although the doctor himself was now hopeless, I think that in some manner he had effected a cure in my case, however ephemeral it may have been. For during those first few moments on that hazy morning, when the taxi edged out of the alley and passed through that neighborhood of gnawed houses, I felt myself attain the middle

ground Dr. Dublanc spoke of—the balancing point between an anxious flight from the abyss and the temptation to plunge into it. There was a great sense of escape, as if I could exist serenely outside the grotesque ultimatums of creation, an entranced spectator casting a clinical gaze at the chaotic tumult both around and within him.

But the feeling soon evaporated. "Could you go a little faster?" I said to the driver when it began to seem to me that we were making no progress in

leaving that district behind: things again appeared to be changing, ready to burst forth from their sagging cocoons and take on uncertain forms. Even the pale morning sun seemed to be wavering from its proper proportions.

At the end of the ride, I was content to pay the extraordinary fare and return to my bed. The following day I started looking for a new doctor.

The Tsalal

I. *Moxton's leavetaking*

None of them could say how it was they had returned to the skeleton town. Some had reached the central cross streets, where a single traffic light, long dead, hung down like a dark lantern. There they paused and stood dumbstruck, scarecrows standing out of place, their clothes lying loose and worn about scrawny bodies. Others slowly joined them, drifting in from the outskirts or disembarking from vehicles weighted down with transportable possessions. Then all of them gathered silently together on that vast, gray afternoon.

They seemed too exhausted to speak and for some time appeared not to recognize their location among the surrounding forms and spaces. Their eyes were fixed with an insomniac's stare, the stigma of both monumental fatigue and painful attentiveness to everything in sight. Their faces were narrow and ashen, a few specks mingling with the dusty surface of that day and seeking to hide themselves within its pale hours. Opposing them was the place they had abandoned and to which they had somehow returned. Only one had not gone with them. He had stayed in the skeleton town, and now they had come back to it, though none of them could say how or why this had happened.

A tall, bearded man who wore a flat-brimmed hat looked up at the sky. Within the clouds was a great seeping darkness, the overflow of the coming night and of a blackness no one had ever seen. After a moment the man said, "It will be dark soon." His words were almost whispered and the effort of speaking appeared to take the last of his strength. But it was not simply a depleted vigor that kept him and the others from turning about and making a second exodus from the town.

No one could say how far they had gone before they reversed their course and turned back toward the place which they believed themselves to have abandoned forever. They could not remember what juncture or dead end

they had reached that aborted the evacuation. Part of that day was lost to them, certain images and experiences hidden away. They could feel these things closeted somewhere in their minds, even if they could not call them to memory. They were sure they had seen something they should not remember. And so no one suggested that they set out again on the road that would take them from the town. Yet they could not accept staying in that place.

A paralysis had seized them, that state of soul known to those who dwell on the highest plane of madness, aristocrats of insanity whose nightmares confront them on either side of sleep. Soon enough the wrenching effect of this psychic immobility became far less tolerable than the prospect of simply giving up and staying in the town. Such was the case with at least one of these cataleptic puppets, a sticklike woman who said, “We have no choice. He has stayed in his house.” Then another voice among them shouted, “He has stayed too long.”

A sudden wind moved through the streets, flapping the garments of the weary home comers and swinging the traffic light that hung over their heads. For a moment all the signals lit up in every direction, disturbing the deep gray twilight.

The colors drenched the bricks of buildings and reflected in windows with a strange intensity. Then the traffic light was dark once more, its fit of transformation done.

The man wearing a flat-brimmed hat spoke again, straining his whispery voice.

“We must meet together after we have rested.”

As the crowd of thin bodies sluggishly dispersed there was almost nothing spoken among them. An old woman shuffling along the sidewalk did not address anyone in particular when she said, “Blessed is the seed that is planted forever in darkness.”

Someone who had heard these words looked at the old woman and asked, “Missus, what did you say?” But the old woman appeared genuinely

confused to learn she had said anything at all.

II. *The one who stayed behind*

In the house where a man named Ray Starns and a succession of others before him once resided, Andrew Maness ascended the stairway leading to the uppermost floor, and there entered a small room

that he had converted to a study and a chamber of meditation. The window in this room looked out over the rooftops in the neighborhood to offer a fair view of Moxton's main street. He watched as everyone abandoned the town, and he watched them when they returned. Now far into the night, he was still watching after they had all retreated to their homes. And every one of these homes was brightly illuminated throughout the night, while Main Street was in darkness. Even the traffic light was extinguished.

He looked away from the window and fixed his eyes on a large book that lay open on his desk a few steps across the room. The pages of the book were brown and brittle as fallen leaves. "Your wild words were true," he said to the book. "My friends did not go far before they were sent trudging back. You know what made them come home, but I can only guess. So many things you have devoutly embellished, yet you offer nothing on this point. As you say, 'The last vision dies with him who beholds it. Blessed is the seed that is planted forever in darkness.' But the seed that has been planted still grows."

Andrew Maness closed the book. Written in dark ink upon its cover was the word TSALAL.

III. *The power of a place*

Before long everyone in Moxton had shut themselves in their houses, and the streets at the center of town were deserted. A few streetlights shone on the dull facades of buildings: small shops, a modest restaurant, a church of indefinite denomination, and even a movie theater, which no one had patronized for some weeks. Surrounding this area were clusters of houses

that in the usual manner collect about the periphery of skeleton towns. These were structures of serene desolation that had settled into the orbit of a dead star. They were simple pinewood coffins, full of stillness, leaning upright against a silent sky. Yet it was this silence that allowed sounds from a fantastic distance to be carried into it. And the stillness of these houses and their narrow streets led the eye to places astonishingly remote. There were even moments when the entire veil of desolate serenity began to tremble with the tumbling colors of chaos.

Everything seems so unusual in the plainness of these neighborhoods that clutter the margins of a skeleton town. Often no mention is made of the peculiar virtues of such places by their residents. Even

so, there maybe a house that does not stand along one of those narrow streets but at its end. This house may even be somewhat different from the others in the neighborhood. Possibly it is taller than the other houses or displays a weathervane that spins in the wind of storms. Perhaps its sole distinguishing quality is that it has been long-unoccupied, making it available as an empty vessel in which much of that magical desolation of narrow streets and coffin-shaped houses comes to settle and distill like an essence of the old alchemists. It seems part of a design—some great inevitability—that this house should exist among the other houses that clutch at the edges of a skeleton town.

And the sense of this vast, all-encompassing design in fact arises within the spindly residents of the area when one day, unexpectedly, there arrives a red-headed man with the key to this particular house.

IV. *Memories of a Moxton childhood*

Andrew Maness closed the book named TSALAL. His eyes then looked around the room, which had not seemed so small to him in the days when he and his father occupied the house, days too long ago for anyone else to recall with clarity. He alone was able to review those times with a sure memory, and he summoned the image of a small bed in the far corner of the room.

As a child he would lie awake deep into the night, his eyes wandering about the moonlit room that seemed so great to his dolllike self. How the shadows enlarged that room, opening certain sections of it to the black abyss beyond the house and beyond the blackness of night, reaching into a blackness no one had ever seen. During these moments things seemed to be changing all around him, and it felt as if he had something to do with this changing. The shadows on the pale walls began to curl about like smoke, creating a swirling murkiness that at times approached sensible shapes—the imperfect zoology of cloud-forms—but soon drifted into hazy nonsense. Smoky shadows gathered everywhere in the room.

It appeared to him that he could see what was making these shadows which moved so slowly and smoothly. He could see that simple objects around him were changing their shapes and making strange shadows. In the moonlight he could see the candle in its tarnished holder resting on the bedstand. The candle had burned quite low when he blew out its flame hours before. Now it was 172

shooting upwards like a flower growing too fast, and it sprouted outward with tallowy vines and blossoms, waxy wings and limbs, pale hands with wriggling fingers and other parts he could not name. When he looked across the room he saw that something was moving back and forth upon the windowsill with a staggered motion. This was a wooden soldier which suddenly stretched out the claws of a crab and began clicking them against the windowpanes. Other things that he could barely see were also changing in the room; he saw shadows twisting about in strange ways. Everything was changing, and he knew that he was doing something to make things change. But this time he could not stop the changes. It seemed the end of everything, the infernal apocalypse …

Only when he felt his father shaking him did he become aware that he had been screaming. Soon he grew quiet. The candle on his bedstand now burned brightly and was not as it had been a few moments before. He quickly surveyed the room to verify that nothing else remained changed. The wooden soldier was lying on the floor, and its two arms were fixed by its sides.

He looked at his father, who was sitting on the bed and still had on the same dark clothes he had worn when he held church services earlier that day.

Sometimes he would see his father asleep in one of the chairs in the parlor or nodding at his desk where he was working on his next sermon. But he had never known his father to sleep during the night.

The Reverend Maness spoke his son's name, and the younger Andrew Maness focused on his father's narrow face, recognizing the crown of white hair, which yet retained a hint of red, and the oval-shaped spectacles reflecting the candle flame. The old man whispered to the boy, as if they were not alone in the house or were engaged in some conspiracy.

"Has it happened again, Andrew?" he asked.

"I did not want to make it happen," Andrew protested. "I was not by myself."

The Reverend Maness held up an open hand of silence and understanding. The glare of the candlelight on his spectacles concealed his eyes, which now turned toward the window beside his son's bed. "The mystery of lawlessness doth already work,"

he said.

"The Epistles," Andrew swiftly responded, as if the quote had been a question.

"Can you finish the passage?"

"Yes, I think I can," answered Andrew, who then assumed a solemn voice and recited: "Now there is one that restraineth, until he be taken out of the way; and then shall be revealed the lawless one, whom the Lord will slay and bring to nought."

"You know it well, that book."

“The Holy Bible,” said Andrew, for it sounded strange to him not to name the book in the proper way.

“Yes, the Holy Bible. You should know its words better than you know anything else on earth. You should always have its words in mind like a magical formula.”

“I do, Father. You have always told me that I should.”

The Reverend Maness suddenly stood up from the bed and towering over his son shouted: “Liar! You did not have the words in your mind on this night. You could not have. You allowed the lawless one to do its work. You are the lawless one, but you must not be. You must become the other one, the katechon, the one who restrains.”

“I’m sorry, Father,” Andrew cried out. “Please don’t be angry with me.”

The Reverend Maness recovered his temper and again held up his open hand, the fingers of which interlocked and separated several times in what appeared to be a deliberate sequence of subtle gesticulations. He turned away from his son and slowly walked the length of the room. When he reached the window on the opposite side he stared out at the blackness that covered the town of Moxton, where he and his son had first arrived some years before. On the main street of the town the reverend had built a church; nearby, he had built a house. The silhouette of the church bell-tower was outlined against moonlit clouds. From across the room the Reverend Maness said to his son, “I built the church in town so that it would be seen. I made the church of brick so that it would endure.”

Now he paced the floor in an attitude of meditation while his son looked on in silence. After some time he stood at the foot of his son’s bed, glaring down as though he stood at the pulpit of his church. “In the Bible there is a beast,” he said. “You know this, Andrew. But did you know that the beast is also within you? It lives in a place that can never see light. Yes, it is housed here, inside the skull, the habitation of the Great Beast. It is a thing so wonderful in form that its existence might be attributed to the fantastic conjurings of a sorcerer or to a

visitation from a far, dark place which no one has ever seen. It is a nightmare that would stop our hearts should we ever behold it gleaming in some shadowy corner of our home, or should we ever— by terrible mischance—lay our hands upon the slime of its flesh. This must never happen, the beast must be kept within its lair. But the beast is a great power that reaches out into the world, a great maker of worlds that are as nothing we can know. And it may work changes on this world. Darkness and light, shape and color, the heavens and the earth—all may be changed by the beast, the great reviser of things seen and unseen, known and unknown. For all that we see and know are but empty vessels in which the beast shall pour a new tincture, therewith changing the aspect of the land, altering the shadows themselves, giving a strange color to our days and our nights, making the day into night, so that we dream while awake and can never sleep again. There is nothing more awful and nothing more sinful than such changes in things. Nothing is more grotesque than these changes. All changes in things are grotesque. The very possibility of changes in things is grotesque.

And the beast is the author of all changes. You must never again consort with the beast!"

"Don't say that, Father!" Andrew screamed, the palms of his hands pressed to his ears in order to obstruct further words of judgment. Yet he heard them all the same.

"You are repentant, but still you do not read the book."

"I do read the book."

"But you do not have the words of the book always in your mind, because you are always reading other books that are forbidden to you. I have seen you looking at my books, and I know that you take them from my shelves like a thief. Those are books that should not be read."

"Then why do you keep them?" Andrew shouted back, knowing that it was evil to question his father and feeling a great joy in having done so. The

Reverend Maness stepped around to the side of the bed, his spectacles flashing in the candlelight.

“I keep them,” he said, “so that you may learn by your own will to renounce what is forbidden in whatever shape it may appear.”

But how wonderful he found those books that were forbidden to him. He remembered seeing them for the first time cloistered on high shelves in his father’s library, that small and windowless room at the very heart of the house the Reverend Maness had built. Andrew knew

these books on sight, not only by the titles which had such words in them as Mystery, Haunted, Secret, and Shadow, but also by the characters that formed these words—a jagged script closely resembling the letters of his own Bible—and by the shades of their cloth bindings, the faded vestments of autumn twilights. He somehow knew these books were forbidden to him, even before the reverend had made this fact explicit to his son and caused the boy to feel ashamed of his desire to hold these books and to know their matter. He became bound to the worlds he imagined were revealed in the books, obsessed with what he conceived to be a cosmology of nightmares. And after he had wrongfully admitted himself to his father’s library, he began to plot in detail the map of a mysterious universe—a place where the sun had passed from view, where towns were cold and dark, where mountains trembled with the monstrosities they concealed, woods rattled with secret winds, and all the seas were horribly calm.

In his dreams of this universe, which far surpassed the darkest visions of any of the books he had read, a never-ending night had fallen upon every imaginable landscape.

In sleep he might thus find himself standing at the rim of a great gorge filled with pointed evergreens, and in the distance were the peaks of hills appearing in black silhouette under a sky chaotic with stars. Sublime scenery of this type often recurred in those books forbidden to him, sometimes providing the subject for one of the engraved illustrations accompanying a narrative. But he had never read in any book what his

dream showed him in the sky above the gorge and above the hills. For each of the bright, bristling stars would begin to loosen in the places where the blackness held them. They wobbled at first, and then they rolled over in their bed of night. Now it was the other side of the stars that he saw, which was unlike anything ever displayed to the eyes of the earth. What he could see resembled not stars but something more like the underside of large stones one might overturn deep in damp woods. They had changed in the strangest way, changed because everything in the universe was changing and could no longer be protected from the changes being worked upon them by something that had been awakened in the blackness, something that desired to remold everything it could see … and had the power to see all things. Now the faces of the stars were crawling with things that made them gleam in a way that stars had never gleamed before. And then these things he saw in his dream 176

began to drip from the stars toward the earth, streaking the night with their gleaming trails.

In those nights of dreaming, all things were subject to forces that knew nothing of law or reason, and nothing possessed its own nature or essence but was only a mask upon the face of absolute darkness, a blackness no one had ever seen.

Even as a child he realized that his dreams did not follow the creation taught to him by his father and by that book. It was another creation he pursued, a counter-creation, and the books on the shelves of his father's library could not reveal to him what he desired to know of this other genesis. While denying it to his father, and often to himself, he dreamed of reading the book that was truly forbidden, the scripture of a deadly creation, one that would tell the tale of the universe in its purest sense.

But where could he find such a book? On what shelf of what library would it appear before his eyes? Would he recognize it when fortune allowed it to fall into his hands? Over time he became certain he would know the book, so often did he dream of it. For in the most unlikely visions he found himself in possession of the book, as though it belonged to him as a legacy. But while he held the book in dreams, and even saw its words with miraculous clarity, he could not comprehend the substance of a script whose

meaning seemed to dissolve into nonsense. Never was he granted in these dreams an understanding of what the book had to tell him. Only as the most obscure and strangest sensations did it communicate with his mind, only as a kind of presence that invaded and possessed his sleep. On waking, all that remained was a euphoric terror. And it was then that objects around him would begin their transformations, for his soul had been made lawless by dreams and his mind was filled with the words of the wrong book.

V. *The author of the book*

"You knew it was hopeless," said Andrew Maness as he stood over the book that lay on the desk, glaring at the pages of old handwriting in black ink. "You told me to always read the right words and to always have them in my mind, but you knew I would read the wrong words. You knew what I was. You knew that such a being existed only to read the wrong words and to want to see those words written across the sky

in a black script. Because you yourself were the author of the book. And you brought your son to the place where he would read your words. This town was the wrong place, and you knew it was the wrong place. But you told yourself it was the only place where what you had done… might be undone. Because you became afraid of what you and those others had done. For years you were intrigued by the greatest madness, the most atrocious secrets and schemes, and then you became afraid. What did you discover that could make you so afraid, you and the others who were always intrigued by the monstrous things you told of, that you sang of, in the book? You preached to me that all change is grotesque, that the very possibility of change is evil. Yet in the book you declare 'transformation as the only truth'—the only truth of the Tsalal, that one who is without law or reason. 'There is no nature to things,' you wrote in the book. 'There are no faces except masks held tight against the pitching chaos behind them.' You wrote that there is not true growth or evolution in the life of this world but only transformations of appearance, an incessant melting and molding of surfaces without underlying essence. Above all you pronounced that there is no salvation of any being because no beings exist as such, nothing exists to be saved—everything, everyone exists only to be drawn into the slow and

endless swirling of mutations that we may see every second of our lives if we simply gaze through the eyes of the Tsalal.

“Yet these truths of yours that you kept writing in your book cannot be the reason you became afraid, for even while your voice is somber or trembling to speak of these things, your phrases are burdened with fascination and you are always marvelling at the grand mockery of the universal masquerade, the ‘hallucination of lies that obscures the vision of all but the elect of the Tsalal.’ It is something of which you will not speak or cannot speak that caused you to become afraid. What did you discover that you could not face without renouncing what you and those others had done, without running to this town to hide yourself in the doctrines of a church that you did not truly uphold? Did this knowledge, this discovery remain within you, at once alive and annihilated to your memory? Was it this that allowed you to prophesy that the people of Moxton would return to their town, yet prevented you from telling what phenomenon could be more terrible than the nightmare they had fled, those grotesque changes which had overtaken the streets and houses of this place?

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“You knew this was the wrong place when you brought me here as a child. And I knew that this was the wrong place when I came home to this town and stayed here, until everyone knew that I had stayed too long in this place.”

VI. *The white-haired woman*

Not long after Andrew Maness moved back to the town of Moxton, an old woman came up to him late one afternoon on the street. He was staring into the window of a repair shop that closed early. Corroded pieces of machinery were strewn before him, as if on display: the guts and bones of a defunct motor of some kind. His reverie was disturbed when the old woman said, “I’ve seen you before.”

“That is possible, ma’am,” he replied. “I moved into a house on Oakman a few weeks ago.”

“No, I mean that I’ve seen you before that.”

He smiled very slightly at the old woman and said, “I lived here for a time, but I didn’t think anyone would remember.”

“I remember the hair. It’s red but kind of greenish too, yellow maybe.”

“Discolored through the years,” he explained.

“I remember it the way it was. And it’s not much different now. My hair’s white as salt.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

“I told those damn fools I remembered. No one listens to me. What’s your name?”

“My name, Mrs. …”

“Spikes,” she snapped.

“My name, Mrs. Spikes, is Andrew Maness.”

“Maness, Maness,” she chanted to herself. “No, I don’t think I know Maness.

You’re in the Starns house.”

“It was in fact purchased from one of Mr. Starns’ family who inherited the house after he died.”

“Used to be the Waterses lived there. Before them the Wellses. And before them the McQuisters. But that’s getting to be before my time. Before the McQuisters is just too damn long to remember. Too damn long.” She was repeating these w ords as she charged off down the street. Andrew Maness watched her thin form and salt-white hair

recede and lose all color in the drab surroundings of the skeleton town.

VII. *Revelations of a unique being*

For Andrew Maness, the world had always been divided into two separate realms defined by what he could only describe as prejudice of soul. Accordingly he was provided with a dual set of responses that he would have to a given locale, so that he would know if it was a place that was right for him, or one that was wrong. In places of the former type there was a separation between his self and the world around him, an enveloping absence. These were the great empty spaces which comprised nearly the whole of the world. There was no threat presented by such places. But there were other places where it seemed a presence of some dreadful kind was allowed to enter, a force that did not belong to these places yet moved freely within them… and within him. It was precisely such places as this, and the presence within them, which came to preside over his life and determine its course. He had no choice, for this was the scheme of the elect persons who had generated him, and he was compelled to fall in with their design. He was in fact the very substance of their design.

His father knew that there were certain places in the world to which he must respond, even in his childhood, and which would cause him to undergo a second birth under the sign of the Tsalal. The Reverend Maness knew that the town of Moxton was among such places—outposts on the desolate borderlands of the real.

He said that he had brought his son to this town so that the boy would learn to resist the presence he would feel here and elsewhere in the world. He said that he had brought his son to the right place, but he had in fact brought him to a place that was entirely wrong for the being that he was. And he said that his son should always fill his mind with the words of that book. But these words were easily silenced and usurped by those other words in those other books. His father seemed to entice him into reading the very books he should not have read.

Soon these books provoked in Andrew Maness the sense of that power and that presence which may manifest itself in a place such as the town of Moxton. And there were other places where he felt that same presence.

Following intuitions that grew stronger as he grew older, Andrew Maness would find such places by hazard or design.

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Perhaps he would come upon an abandoned house standing shattered and bent in an isolated landscape—a raw skeleton in a boneyard. But this dilapidated structure would seem to him a temple, a wayside shrine to that dark presence with which he sought union, and also a doorway to the dark world in which it dwelled. Nothing can convey those sensations, the countless nuances of trembling excitement, as he approached such a decomposed edifice whose skewed and ragged outline suggested another order of existence, the truest order of existence, as though such places as this house were only wavering shadows cast down to earth by a distant, unseen realm of entity. There he would experience the touch of something outside himself, something whose will was confused with his own, as in a dream wherein one feels possessed of a fantastic power to determine what events will transpire and yet also feels helpless to control that power, which, through oneself, may produce the chaos of nightmare. This mingling of mastery and helplessness overwhelmed him with a black intoxication and suggested his life's goal: to work the great wheel that turns in darkness, and to be broken upon it.

Yet Andrew Maness had always known that his ambition was an echo of that conceived by his father many years before, and that the pursuit of this ambition had been consummated in his own birth.

VIII. *Not much more than a century ago*

"As a young man," the Reverend Maness explained to his son, who was now a young man himself, "I thought myself an adept in the magic of the old gods, a communicant of entities both demonic and divine. I did not comprehend for years that I was merely a curator in the museum where the old gods were on display, their replicas and corpses set up in the countless galleries of the invisible…

and now the extinct. I knew that in past millennia these beings had always replaced one another as each of them passed away along with the worlds

that worshipped them. This mirror-like succession of supreme monarchs may still seem eternal to those who have not sensed the great shadow which has always been positioned behind every deity or pantheon. Yet I was able to sense this shadow and see that it had eclipsed the old gods without in anyway being one of their kind. For it was even older than they, the dark background against which they had forever carried on their escapades as best they could. But its emergence into

the foreground of things was something new, an advent occurring not much more than a century ago. Perhaps this great blackness, this shadow, has always prevailed on worlds other than our own, places that have never known the gods of order, the gods of design. Even this world had long prepared for it, creating certain places where the illusion of a reality was worn quite thin and where the gods of order and design could barely breathe. Such places as this town of Moxton became fertile ground for this blackness no one had ever seen.

“Yes, it was not much more than a century ago that the people of this world betrayed their awareness of a new god that was not a god. Such an awareness may never be complete, never reach a true agony of illumination, except among an elect. I myself was slow in coming to it. The authenticity of my enlightenment may seem questionable and arbitrary, considering its source. Nonetheless, there is a tradition of revelation, an ancient protocol, by which knowledge of the unseen is delivered to us through inspired texts. And it is by means of these scriptures dictated from beyond that we of this world may discover what we have not and cannot experience in a direct confrontation. So it was with the Tsalal.

But the book that I have written, and which I have named Tsalal, is not the revealed codex of which I am speaking. It is only a reflection, or rather a distillation, of those other writings in which I first detected the existence, the emergence, of the Tsalal itself.

“Of course, there have always been writings of a certain kind, a primeval lore which provided allusions to the darkness of creation and to monstrosities of every type, human and inhuman, as if there were a

difference. Something profoundly dark and grotesque has always had a life in every language of this world, appearing at intervals and throwing its shadow for a moment upon stories that try to make sense of things, often confounding the most happy tale. And this shadow is never banished in any of these stories, however we may pretend otherwise. The darkness of the grotesque is an immortal enigma: in all the legends of the dead, in all the tales of creatures of the night, in all the mythologies of mad gods and lucid demons, there remains a kind of mocking nonsense to the end, a thick and resonant voice which calls out from the heart of these stories and declares: 'Still I am here.' And the idiot laughter of that voice—how it sounds through the ages! This laughter often reaches our ears through certain stories wherein this grotesque spirit itself has had a hand.

However we have

tried to ignore the laughter of this voice, however we have tried to overwhelm its words and protect ourselves by always keeping other words in our minds, it still sounds throughout the world.

"But it was not much more than a century ago that this laughter began to rise to a pitch. You have heard it yourself, Andrew, as you furtively made incursions into my library during your younger days, revelling in a Gothic feast of the grotesque. These books do not hold an arcane knowledge intended for the select few but were written for a world which had begun to slight the gods of order and design, to question their very existence and to exalt in the disorders of the grotesque. Both of us have now studied the books in which the Tsalal was being gradually revealed as the very nucleus of our universe, even if their authors remained innocent of the revelations they were perpetrating. It was from one of the most enlightened of this sect of Gothic storytellers that I took the name of that one. You recall, Andrew, the adventures of an Arthur Pym in a fantastic land where everything, people and landscape alike, is of a perfect blackness—the Antarctic country of Tsalal. This was among the finest evocations I had discovered of that blackness no one had ever seen, a literary unveiling of being without soul or substance, without meaning or necessity—not a universe of design and order but one whose sole principle was that of senseless transmutation. A

universe of the grotesque. And from that moment it became my ambition to invoke what I now called the Tsalal, and ultimately to effect a worldly incarnation of the thing itself.

“Through the years I found there were others who had become entranced with an ambition so near to my own that we formed a league… the elect of the Tsalal.

They too had been adepts of the old gods who had been made impotent or extinct by the emergence of that one, an inevitable advent which we were avid to hasten and lose ourselves in. For we had recognized the mask of our identities, and our only consolation for what we had lost, a perverse salvation, was to embrace the fatality of the Tsalal. Vital to this end was a woman upon whom was performed a ceremony of conception. And it was during these rites that we first came into the most intimate communion with that one, which moved within us all and worked the most wonderful changes upon so many things.

“None of us suspected how it would be when we gathered that last night. This all happened in another country, an older country. But it 183

was nevertheless a place like this town of Moxton, a place where the appearances of this world seem to waver at times, hovering before one’s eyes as a mere fog.

This place was known among our circle as the Street of Lamps, which was the very heart of a district under the sign of the Tsalal. In recollection, the lamps seem only a quirk of scene, an accident of atmosphere, but at the time they were to us the eyes of the Tsalal itself. These sidewalk fixtures of radiant glass upheld by dark metal stems formed a dreamlike procession up and down the street, a spectacle of infinite pathos and mystery. One poet of the era called them ‘iron lilies,’ and another compared their jewel-like illumination to the yellow topaz. In a different language, and a different city, these devices—les reverberes, les bees de gaz—were also celebrated, an enigmatic sign of a century, a world, that was guttering out.

“It was in this street that we prepared a room for your birth and your nurturing under the sign of the Tsalal. There were few other residents in this

ramshackle area, and they abandoned it some time before you were born, frightened off by changes that all of us could see taking place in the Street of Lamps. At first the changes were slight: spiders had begun laying webs upon the stones of the street and thin strands of smoke spun out from chimney stacks, tangling together in the sky. When the night of your birth arrived the changes became more intense. They were focused on the room in which we gathered to chant the invocation to the Tsalal. We incanted throughout the night, standing in a circle around the woman who had been the object of the ceremony of conception. Did I mention that she was not one of us? No, she was a gaunt denizen of the Street of Lamps whose body we appropriated some months before, an honorary member of our sect whom we treated very well during her term of captivity. As the moment of your birth drew closer she lay upon the floor of the ceremonial room and began screaming in many different voices. We did not expect her to survive the ordeal.

Neither did we expect the immediate consequences of the incarnation we attempted to effect, the consummation of a bond between this woman and the Tsalal.

“We were inviting chaos into the world, we knew this. We had been intoxicated by the prospect of an absolute disorder. With a sense of grim exaltation we greeted the intimations of a universal nightmare—the ultimate point of things. But on that night, even as we invoked the Tsalal within that room, we came to experience a realm of the unreal hitherto unknown to us. And we discovered that 184

it had never been our desire to lose ourselves in the unreal, not in the manner which threatened us in the Street of Lamps. For as you, Andrew, began to enter the world through this woman, so was the Tsalal also entering the world through this woman. She was now the seed of that one, her flesh radiant and swelling in the fertile ground of the unreal which was the Street of Lamps. We looked beyond the windows of that room, already contemplating our escape. But then we saw that there was no longer any street, nor any buildings along that street. All that remained were the streetlamps with their harsh yellow glow like rotten stars, endless rows of streetlamps that ascended into the all-encompassing blackness.

Can you imagine: endless rows of streetlamps ascending into the blackness.

Everything that sustained the reality of the world around us had been drained away. We noticed how our own bodies had become suddenly drawn and meager, while the body of that woman, the seed of the coming apocalypse, was becoming ever more swollen with the power and magic of the Tsalal. And we knew at that moment what needed to be done if we were ever to escape the unreality that had been sown in that place called the Street of Lamps."

IX. *A skeleton town*

Even in the time of the McQuisters, which almost no one could remember very well, Moxton was a skeleton town. No building there had ever seemed new. Every crudded brick or faded board, every crusted shingle or frayed awning appeared to be handed down from the demise of another structure in another town, cast-offs of a thriving center that had no use for worn out materials. The front windows of stores were cloudy with a confusion of reflected images from someplace else.

Entire establishments might have been dumped off in Moxton, where buildings stood along the street like odd objects forgotten on a cellar shelf.

It was less a real town than the semblance of a town, a pasteboard backdrop to an old stage show, its outlines crudely stroked with an antique paintbrush unconcerned with the details of character and identity, lettering the names of streets and shops with senseless scribbles no one was ever meant to read.

Everything that might have been real about the town had somehow become thwarted.

Nothing flourished there, nothing made a difference by its presence or absence.

No business could do more than anonymously survive in Moxton. Even larger enterprises such as a dimestore or a comfortable hotel could not

assert themselves but were forced to assume the same air of unreality possessed by lesser establishments: the shoe store whose tiny front window displayed merchandise long out of style, the clothes store where dust collected in the folds of garments worn by headless mannikins, the repair shop at which a good number of the items brought in were left unclaimed and lay corroding in every cranny of the place.

Many years ago a movie theater opened on the prominent corner of Webster and Main, decades before a traffic light had been hung over the intersection of these streets. A large neon sign with letters stacked in a vertical file spelled out the word RIVIERA. For a moment this word appeared in searing magenta against the Moxton twilight, calling up and down the street to everyone in the town. But by nightfall the glowing letters had been subdued, their glamor suffocating in a rarefied atmosphere where sights and sounds were drained of reality. The new movie theater now burned no more brightly than McQuister's Pharmacy across the street. Both of them were allotted a steady and modest patronage in a skeleton town that was no more enchanted with the one than the other.

Thus was the extent of Moxton's compromise with any manifestation of the real.

For there are certain places that exist on the wayside of the real: a house, a street, even entire towns which have claims upon them by virtue of some nameless affinity with the most remote orders of being. They are, these places, fertile ground for the unreal and retain the minimum of immunity against exotic disorders and aberrations. Their concessions to a given fashion of reality are only placating gestures, a way of stifling it through limited acceptance. It was unnecessary, even perverse, to resist construction of the movie theater or the new church (founded in 1893 by the Rev. Andrew Maness). Such an action might imbue these things with an unwarranted measure of substance or power, and in a skeleton town there is little substance, while all power resides only in the unreal. The citizens of such a place are custodians of a rare property, a precious estate whose true owners are momentarily absent. All that remains before full proprietorship of the land may be assumed is the planting of a single seed and its nurturing

over a sufficient period of time, an interval that has nothing to do with the hours and days of the world.

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As Andrew Maness grew older in the town of Moxton he watched his father submit to the despair and the wonder that he could not unmake the thing that he and those others had incarnated. On several occasions the reverend entered his son's room as the boy slept. With knife and ax and long-handled scythe he attempted to break the growing bond between his son and the Tsalal. In the morning young Andrew's bedroom would reek like a slaughterhouse. But his limbs and organs were again made whole and a new blood flowed within them, proving the reality of what had been brought into the world by his father and those other enthusiasts of that one.

There were times when the Reverend Maness, in a state of awe and desperation, awoke his son from dreams and made his appeal to the boy, informing him that he was reaching a perilous juncture in his development and begging him to submit to a peculiar ritual that would be consummated by Andrew's ruin.

"What ritual is this?" Andrew asked with a novitiate's excitation. But the reverend's powers of speech became paralyzed at this question and many nights would pass before he again broached the subject.

At last the Reverend Maness came into his son's room carrying a book. He opened the book to its final pages and began to read. And the words he read laid out a scheme for his son's destruction. These words were his own, the ultimate chapter in a great work he had composed documenting a wealth of revelations concerning the force or entity called the Tsalal.

Andrew could not take his eyes off the book and strained to hear every resonance of his father's reading from it, even if the ritual the old man spelled out dictated the atrocious manner of Andrew's death— the obliteration of the seed of the apocalypse which was called the Tsalal.

"Your formula for cancelling my existence calls for the participation of others," Andrew observed. "The elect of… that one."

“Tsalal,” the Reverend Maness intoned, still captivated by an occult nomenclature.

“Tsalal,” Andrew echoed. “My protector, my guardian of the black void.”

“You are not yet wholly the creature of that one. I have tried to change what I could not. But you have stayed too long in this place, 187

which was the wrong place for a being such as you. You are undergoing a second birth under the sign of the Tsalal. But there is still enough time if you will submit yourself to the ritual.”

“I must ask you, Father: who will carry it out? Will there be a convocation of strangers in this town?”

After a painfully reflective pause, the reverend said: “There are none remaining who will come. They would be required to relive the events following your birth, the first time you were born.”

“And my mother?” Andrew asked.

“She did not survive.”

“But how did she die?”

“By the ritual,” the Reverend Maness confessed. “At the ritual of your birth it became necessary to perform the ritual of death.”

“Her death.”

“As I told you before. This ritual had never been performed, or even conceived, prior to that night on which you were born. We did not know what to expect. But after a certain point, after seeing certain things, we acted in the correct manner, as if we had always known what needed to be done.”

“And what needed to be done, Father?”

“It is all in this book.”

“You have the book, but you’re still lacking for those others. A congregation, so to speak.”

“I have my congregation in this very town. They will do what needs to be done.

To this you must submit yourself. To the end of your existence you must consent.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Soon,” the Reverend Maness began, “the bond will be sealed between you and the other, that one which is all nightmare of grotesque metamorphoses behind the dream of earthly forms, that one which is the center of so-called entity and so-called essence. To the living illusions of the world of light will come a blackness no one has ever seen, a dawn of darkness. What you yourself have known of these things is only a passing glimpse, a flickering candleflame beside the conflagration which is to come. You have found yourself fascinated by those moments after you have been asleep, and awake to see how the things around you are affected in their form. You look on as they change in every freakish manner, feeling the power that changes them to be connected to your own being, conveying to you its magic

through a delicate cord. Then the cord grows too thin to hold, your mind returns to you, and the little performance you were watching comes to an end. But you have already stayed long enough in this place to have begun a second birth under the sign of the Tsalal. The cord between you and that one is strong. Wherever you go, you will be found. Wherever you stay, there the changes will begin. For you are the seed of that one. You are just as the luz, the bone-seed of rabbinic prophecy: that sliver of every mortal self from which the whole body may be reconstructed and stand for judgement at the end of time. Wherever you stay, there the resurrection will begin. You are a fragment of the one that is without law or reason. The body that will grow out of you is the true body of all things. The changes themselves are the body of the Tsalal. The changes are the truth of all bodies, which we believe have a face and a substance only because we cannot see that they are

always changing, that they are only fragile forms which are forever being shattered in the violent whirlpool of truth. “This is how it will be for all your days: you will be drawn to a place that reveals the sign of the Tsalal—an aspect of the unreal, a forlorn glamor in things—and with your coming the changes will begin. These may go unnoticed for a time, affecting only very small things or greater things in subtle ways, a disruption of forms that you very well know. But other people will sense that something is wrong in that place, which may be a certain house or street or even an entire town. They will go about with uneasy eyes and become emaciated in their flesh, their very bones growing thin with worry, becoming worn down and warped just as the world around them is slowly stripped of whatever seemed real, leaving them famished for the sustenance of old illusions. Rumors will begin to pass among them about unpleasant things they believe they have seen or felt and yet cannot explain—a confusion among the lower creatures, perhaps, or a stone that seems to throb with a faint life. For these are the modest beginnings of the chaos that will ultimately consume the stars themselves, which may be left to crawl within that great blackness no one has ever seen. And by their proximity to your being they will know that you are the source of these changes, that through your being these changes radiate into the world. The longer you stay in a place, the worse it will become. If you leave such a place in time, then the changes can have no lasting power—the ultimate point will not have been reached, and it will be as the little performances of grotesquerie you have witnessed in your own room.”

“And if I do stay in such a place?” asked Andrew.

“Then the changes will proceed toward the ultimate point. So long as you can bear to watch the appearances of things become degraded and confused, so long as you can bear to watch the people in that place wither in their bodies and minds, the changes will proceed toward their ultimate point—the disintegration of all apparent order, the birth of the Tsalal. Before that happens you must submit to the ritual of the ultimate point.”

But Andrew Maness only laughed at his father’s scheme, and the sound of this laughter almost shattered the reverend entirely. In a deliberately serious

voice, Andrew said: “Do you really believe you will gain the participation of others?”

“The people of this town will do the work of the ritual,” his father replied.

“When they have seen certain things, they will do what must be done. Their hunger to preserve the illusions of their world will surpass their horror at what must be done to save it. But it will be your decision whether or not you will submit to the ritual which will determine the course of so many things in this world.”

ii. A meeting in Moxton

Everyone in the town gathered in the church that the Reverend Maness had built so many years ago. No others had succeeded the reverend, and no services had been held since the time of his pastorate. The structure had never been outfitted with electricity, but the illumination of numerous candles and oil lamps the congregation had brought supplemented the light of a grayish afternoon that penetrated the two rows of plain, peaked windows along either side of the church. In the corner of one of those windows a spider fumbled about in its web, struggling awkwardly with appendages that resembled less the nimble legs of the arachnid than they did an octet of limp tentacles. After several thrusts the creature reached the surface of a window pane and passed into the glass itself, where it began to move about freely in its new element.

The people of Moxton had tried to rest themselves before this meeting, but their haggard look spoke of a failure to do so. The entire population of the town barely filled a half dozen pews at the front of the church, although some were collapsed upon the floor and others shuffled restlessly along the center aisle.

All of them appeared even

more emaciated than the day before, when they had attempted to escape the town and unaccountably found themselves driven back to it.

“Everything has gotten worse since we returned,” said one man, as if to initiate the meeting which had no obvious hope or purpose beyond collecting in a single place the nightmares of the people of Moxton. A murmur of voices rose up and echoed throughout the church. Several people spoke of what they had witnessed the night before, reciting a litany of grotesque phenomena that had prohibited sleep.

There was a bedroom wall which changed colors, turning from its normal rosy tint that was calm and pale in the moonlight to a quivering and luminescent green that rippled like the flesh of a great reptile. There was a little doll whose neck began to elongate until it was writhing through the air like a serpent, while its tiny doll’s head whispered words that had no sense in them yet conveyed a profoundly hideous meaning. There were things no one had seen that made noises of a deeply troubling nature in the darkness of cellars or behind the doors of closets and cupboards. And then there was something that people saw when they looked through the windows of their houses toward the house where a man named Andrew Maness now lived. But when anyone began to describe what it was they saw in the vicinity of that house, which they called the McQuister house, their words became confused. They did see something and yet they saw nothing.

“I also saw what you speak of,” whispered the tall, bearded man who wore a flat-brimmed hat. “It was a blackness, but it was not the blackness of the night or of shadows. It was hovering over the old McQuister place, or around it. This was something I had not seen in Moxton even since the changes.”

“No, not in Moxton, not in the town. But you have seen it before. We have all seen it,” said a man’s voice that sounded as if it came from elsewhere in the church.

“Yes,” answered the tall man, as if confessing a thing that had formerly been denied. “But we are not seeing it the way it might be seen, the way we had seen it when we were outside the town, when we tried to leave and could not.”

“That was not blackness we saw then,” said one of the younger women who seemed to be wresting an image from her memory. “It was something …

something that wasn’t blackness at all.”

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“There were different things,” shouted an old man who suddenly stood up from one of the pews, his eyes fixed in a gaze of revelation. A moment later this vision appeared to dissolve, and he sat down again. But the eyes of others followed this vision, surveying the empty spaces of the church and watching the flickering lights of the many lamps and candles.

“There were different things,” someone started to say, and then someone else completed the thought: “But they were all spinning and confused, all swirling together.”

“Until all we could see was a great blackness,” said the tall man, gaining his voice again.

A silence now overcame the congregation, and the words they had spoken seemed to be disappearing into this silence, once more drawing the people of Moxton back to the refuge of their former amnesia. But before their minds lost all clarity of recollection a woman named Mrs. Spikes rose to her feet and from the last row of the church, where she sat alone, cried out, “Everything started with him, the one in the McQuister house.”

“How long has it been?” one voice asked.

“Too long,” answered Mrs. Spikes. “I remember him. He’s older than I am, but he doesn’t look older. His hair is a strange color.”

“Reddish like pale blood,” said one.

“Green like mold,” said another. “Or yellow and orange like a candleflame.”

“He lived in that house, that same house, a long time ago,” continued Mrs.

Spikes. “Before the McQuisters. He lived with his father. But I can only remember the stories. I didn’t see anything myself. Something happened

one night. Something happened to the whole town. Their name was Maness."

"That is the name of the man who built this church," said the tall man. "He was the first clergyman this town had seen. And there were no others after him. What happened, Mrs. Spikes?"

"It was too long ago for anyone to remember. I only know the stories. The reverend said things about his son, said the boy was going to do something and how people had to keep it from happening."

"What happened, Mrs. Spikes? Try to remember."

"I'm trying. It was only yesterday that I started to remember. It was when we got back to town. I remembered something that the reverend said in the stories about that night."

"I heard you," said another woman. "You said, 'Blessed is the seed that is planted forever in darkness.'"

Mrs. Spikes stared straight ahead and lightly pounded the top of the pew with her right hand, as though she were calling up memories in this manner. Then she said: "That's what he was supposed to have been saying that night, 'Blessed is the seed that is planted forever in darkness.' And he said that people had to do something, but the stories I heard when I was growing up don't say what he wanted people to do. It was about his son. It was something queer, something no one understood. But no one did anything that he wanted them to do. When they took him home, his son wasn't there, and no one saw that young man again. The stories say that the ones who brought the reverend to his house saw things there, but no one could explain what they saw. What everyone did remember was that late the same night the bells started ringing up in the tower of this church. That's where they found the reverend. He'd hung himself. It wasn't until the McQuisters moved into town that anyone would go near the reverend's house.

Then it seemed no one could remember anything about the place."

“Just as we could not remember what happened only yesterday,” said the tall man.

“Why we came back to this place when it was the last place we wanted to be. The blackness we saw that was a blackness no one had ever seen. That blackness which was not a blackness but was all the colors and shapes of things darkening the sky.”

“A vision!” said one old man who for many years had been the proprietor of McQuister’s Pharmacy.

“Perhaps only that,” replied the tall man.

“No,” said Mrs. Spikes. “It was something he did. It was like everything else that’s been happening since he came here and stayed so long. All the little changes in things that kept getting worse. It’s something that’s been moving in like a storm. People have seen that it’s in the town now, hanging over that house of his. And the changes in things are worse than ever. Pretty soon it’s us that’ll be changing.”

Then there arose a chorus of voices among the congregation, all of them composing a conflict between “we must do something” and “what can be done?”

While the people of Moxton murmured and fretted in the light of lamps and candles, there was a gradual darkening outside the windows of the church. An unnatural blackness was overtaking the

gray afternoon. And the words of these people also began to change, just as so many things had changed in that town. Within the same voices there mingled both keening outcries of fear and a low, muttering invocation. Soon the higher pitched notes in these voices diminished and then wholly disappeared as the deeper tones of incantation prevailed. Now they were all chanting a single word in hypnotic harmony: Tsalal, Tsalal, Tsalal. And standing at the pulpit was the one who was leading the chant, the man whose strangely shaded hair shone in the light of candles and oil lamps. At

last he had come from his house where he had stayed too long. The bell in the tower began to ring, sounding in shattered echoes. The resonant cacophony of voices swelled within the church. For these were the voices of people who had lived so long in the wrong place. These were people of a skeleton town.

The figure at the pulpit lifted up his hands before his congregation, and they grew quiet. When he focused his eyes on an old woman sitting alone in the last row, she rose from her seat and walked to the double doors at the rear of the church. The man at the pulpit spread his arms wider, and the old woman pushed back each of the doors.

Through the open doorway was the main street of Moxton, but it was not as it had been. An encompassing blackness had descended and only the lights of the town could be seen. But these lights were now as endless as the blackness itself. The rows of yellowish streetlamps extended to infinity along an avenue of the abyss.

Fragments of neon signs were visible, the vibrant magenta letters of the movie theater recurring again and again, as though reflected in a multitude of black mirrors. In the midst of the other lights hovered an endless succession of traffic signals that filled the blackness like multicolored stars. All these bright remnants of the town, its broken pieces in transformation, were becoming increasingly dim and distorted, bleeding their radiance into the blackness that was consuming them, even as it freakishly multiplied the shattered images of the world, collecting them within its kaleidoscope of colors so dense and so varied that they lost themselves within a black unity.

The man who had built the church in which the people of Moxton were gathered had spoken of the ultimate point. This was now imminent. And as the moment approached, the gathering within the church moved toward the figure at the pulpit, who descended to meet them. They were far beyond their old fears, these skeleton people.

They had attained the stripped bone of being, the last layer of an existence without name or description, without nature or essence: the nothingness of

the blackness no one had ever seen … or would ever see. For no one had ever lived except as a shadow of the blackness of the Tsalal.

And their eyes looked to the one who was the incarnation of the blackness, and who had come to them to seal his bond with that other one. They looked to him for some word or gesture in order to bring to fulfilment that day which had turned into night. They looked to him for the thing that would bind them to the blackness and join them within the apocalypse of the unreal.

Finally, as if guided by some whim of the moment, he told them how to do what must be done.

12. What is remembered

The story that circulated in later years among the people of Moxton told how everyone had gathered in the church one afternoon during a big storm that lasted into the night. Unused for decades before this event, the church was strongly constructed and proved a suitable shelter. There were some who recalled that for weeks prior to this cataclysm a variety of uncommon effects had resulted from what they described as a season of strange weather in the vicinity of the town.

The details of this period remain unclear, as do memories of a man who briefly occupied the old McQuister place around the time of the storm. No one had ever spoken with him except Mrs. Spikes, who barely recollected their conversation and who died of cancer not long after the biggest storm of the year. The house in which the man had lived was previously owned by relatives of Ray Starns, but the Starns people were no longer residents of Moxton. In any case, the old McQuister place was not the only untenanted house in the skeleton town, and there was no reason for people to concern themselves with it. Nor did anyone in Moxton give serious thought to the church once the storm had passed. The doors were once again secured against intruders, but no one ever tested these old locks which had been first put in place after the Reverend Maness hung himself in the church tower.

Had the people of the town of Moxton ventured beyond the 195

doors of the church they might have found what they left behind following the abatement of the storm. Lying twisted at the foot of the pulpit was the skeleton of a man whose name no one would have been able to remember. The bones were clean. No bit of their flesh could be discovered either in the church or anywhere else in the town. Because the flesh was that of one who had stayed in a certain place too long. It was the seed, and now it had been planted in a dark place where it would not grow. They had buried his flesh deep in the barren ground of their meager bodies. Only a few strands of hair of an unusual color lay scattered upon the floor, mingling with the dust of the church.

The Bungalow House

Early Last September I discovered among the exhibits in a local art gallery a sort of performance piece in the form of an audiotape. This, I later learned, was the first of a series of tape-recorded dream monologues by an unknown artist. The following is a brief and highly typical excerpt from the opening section of this work. I recall that after a few seconds of hissing tape noise, the voice began speaking: “There was far more to deal with in the bungalow house than simply an infestation of vermin,” it said, “although that too had its questionable aspects.” Then the voice went on: “I could see only a few of the bodies where the moonlight shone through the open blinds of the living room windows and fell upon the carpet. Only one of the bodies seemed to be moving, and that very slowly, but there may have been more that were not yet dead. Aside from the chair in which I sat in the darkness there was very little furniture in the room, or elsewhere in the bungalow house for that matter. But a number of lamps were positioned around me, floor lamps and table lamps and even two tiny lamps on the mantel above the fireplace.”

A brief pause occurred here in the opening section of the tape-recorded dream monologue, as I remember it, after which the voice continued: ‘“The bungalow house was built with a fireplace,’ I said to myself in the darkness, thinking how long it had been since anyone had made use of this fireplace, or anything else in the bungalow. Then my attention returned to the lamps, and I began trying each of them one by one, twisting their little grooved switches in the darkness. The moonlight fell upon the lampshades without shining through them, so I could not see that none of the lamps was equipped with a lightbulb, and each time I turned the switch of a floor lamp or a table lamp or one of the tiny lamps on the mantel, nothing changed in the 197

dark living room of the bungalow house: the moonlight shone through the dusty blinds and revealed the bodies of insects and other vermin on the pale carpet.”

“The challenges and obstacles facing me in that bungalow house were becoming more and more oppressive,” whispered the voice on the tape. “There was something so desolate about being in that place in the dead of night, even if I did not know precisely what time it was. And to see upon the pale, threadbare carpet those verminous bodies, some of which were still barely alive; then to try each of the lamps and find that none of them was in working order—everything, it seemed, was in opposition to my efforts, everything aligned against my taking care of the problems I faced in the bungalow house. For the first time I noticed that the bodies lying for the most part in total stillness on the moonlit carpet were not like any species of vermin I had ever seen,” the voice on the tape recording said. “Some of them seemed to be deformed, their naturally revolting forms altered in ways I could not discern. I knew that I would require specialized implements for dealing with these creatures, an arsenal of advanced tools of extermination. It was the idea of poisons—the toxic solutions and vapors I would need to use in my assault, upon the bungalow hordes—that caused me to become overwhelmed by the complexities of the task before me and the paucity of my resources for dealing with them.”

At this point, and many others on the tape (as I recall), the voice became nearly inaudible. “The bungalow house,” it said, “was such a bleak environment in which to make a stand: the moonlight through the dusty blinds, the bodies on the carpet, the lamps without any lightbulbs. And the incredible silence. It was not the absence of sounds that I sensed, but the stifling of innumerable sounds and even voices, the muffling of all the noises one might expect to hear in an old bungalow house in the dead of night, as well as countless other sounds and voices. The forces required to accomplish this silence filled me with awe. The infinite terror and dreariness of an infested bungalow house, I whispered to myself. A bungalow universe, I then thought without speaking aloud. Suddenly I was overcome by a feeling of euphoric hopelessness which passed through my body like a powerful drug and held all my thoughts and all my movements in a dreamy, floating suspension. In the moonlight that shone through the blinds of that bungalow house I was now as still and as silent as everything else.”

The title of the tape-recorded artwork from which I have just quoted was The Bungalow House (Plus Silence). I discovered this and other dream monologues by the same artist at Dalha D. Fine Arts, which was located in the near vicinity of the public library (main branch) where I was employed in the Language and Literature department. Sometimes I spent my lunch breaks at the gallery, even consuming my brown-bag meals on the premises. There were a few chairs and benches on the floor of the gallery, and I knew that the woman who owned the place did not discourage any kind of traffic, however lingering. Her actual livelihood was in fact not derived from the gallery itself. How could it have been? Dalha D. Fine Arts was a hole in the wall. One would think it no trouble at all to keep up the premises where there was so little floor space, just a single room that was by no means overcrowded with artworks or art-related merchandise. But no attempt at such upkeeping seemed ever to have been made. The display windowwas so filmy that someone passing by could barely make out the paintings and sculptures behind it (the same ones year after year). From the street outside, this tiny front window presented the most desolate hallucination of bland colors and shapeless forms, especially on late November afternoons.

Further inside the gallery, things were in a similar state—from the cruddy linoleum floor, where some cracked tiles revealed the concrete foundation, to the rather high ceiling, which occasionally sent down small chips of plaster. If every artwork and item of art-related merchandise had been cleared out of that building, no one would think that an art gallery had once occupied this space and not some enterprise of a lesser order.

But as many persons were aware, if only through secondhand sources, the woman who operated Dalha D. Fine Arts did not make her living by dealing in those artworks and related items which only the most desperate or scandalously naive artist would allow to be put on display in that gallery. By all accounts, including my own brief lunchtime conversations with the woman, she had pursued a variety of careers in her time. She herself had worked as an artist at one point, and some of her works—messy assemblages inside old cigar boxes— were exhibited in a corner of her gallery. But evidently her art gallery business was not self-sustaining, despite minimal overheads, and she made no secret of her true means of income.

“Who wants to buy such junk?” she once explained to me, 199

gesturing with long fingernails painted emerald green. This same color also seemed to dominate her wardrobe of long, loose garments, often featuring incredible scarves or shawls that dragged along the floor as she moved about the art gallery. She paused and with the pointed toe of one of her emerald green shoes gave a little kick at a wire wastebasket that was filled with the miniature limbs of dolls, all of them individually painted in a variety of colors. “What are people thinking when they make these things? What was I thinking with those stupid cigar boxes? But no more of that, definitely no more of that sort of thing.”

And she made no secret, beyond a certain reasonable caution, of what sort of thing now engaged her energies as a businesswoman. The telephone was always ringing at her art gallery, always upsetting the otherwise dead calm of the place with its cracked, warbling voice that called out from the back room. She would then quickly disappear behind a curtain that hung in the doorway separating the front and back sections of the art gallery. I might be eating my sandwich or a piece of fruit, and then suddenly, for the fourth or fifth time in a halfhour, the telephone would scream from the back room, eventually summoning this woman behind the curtain. But she never answered the telephone with the name of the art gallery or employed any of the stock phrases of business protocol. Not so much as a “Good afternoon, may I help you?” did I ever hear from the back room as I sat eating my midday meal in the front section of the art gallery. She always answered the telephone in the same way with the same quietly expectant tone in her voice. This is Dalha, she always said.

Before I had known her very long she even had me using her name in the most familiar way. The mere saying of this name instilled in me a sense of access to what she offered all those telephone-callers, not to mention those individuals who personally visited the art gallery to make or confirm an appointment.

Whatever someone was eager to try, whatever step someone was willing to take—Dalha could arrange it. This was the true stock in trade of the art gallery, these arrangements. When I returned to the library after my lunch break, I continued to imagine Dalha back at the art gallery, racing between

the front and back sections of the building, making all kinds of arrangements over the telephone, and sometimes in person.

On the day that I first noticed the new artwork entitled The Bungalow House, Dalha's telephone was extremely vocal. While she 200

was talking to her clients in the back section of the art gallery, I was practically left alone in the front section. Just for a thrill I went over to the wire wastebasket full of dismembered doll parts and lifted one of the painted arms (emerald green!), hiding it in the inner pocket of my sportcoat. It was then that I spotted the old audiotape recorder on a small plastic table in the corner. Beside the machine was a business card on which the title of the artwork had been handprinted, along with the following instructions: PRESS PLAY.

PLEASE REWIND AFTER. LISTENING. DO NOT REMOVE TAPE. I placed the headphones over my ears and pressed the PLAY button. The voice that spoke through the headphones, which were enormous, sounded distant and was somewhat distorted by the hissing of the tape. Nevertheless, I was so intrigued by the opening passages of this dream monologue, which I have already transcribed, that I sat down on the floor next to the small plastic table on which the tape recorder was positioned and listened to the entire tape, exceeding my allotted lunchtime by over half an hour. By the time the tape had ended I was in another world—that is, the world of the infested bungalow house, with all its dreamlike crumminess and foul charms.

"Don't forget to rewind the tape," said Dalha, who was now standing over me, her long gray hair, like steel wool, almost brushing against my face.

I pressed the REWIND button on the tape recorder and got up from the floor.

"Dalha, may I use your lavatory?" I asked. She pointed to the curtain leading to the back section of the art gallery. "Thank you," I said.

The effect of listening to the first dream monologue was very intense for reasons I will soon explain. I wanted to be alone for a few moments in order

to preserve the state of mind which the voice on the tape had induced in me, much as one might attempt to hold on to the images of a dream just after waking.

However, I felt that the lavatory at the library, despite its peculiar virtues which I have appreciated over the years, would somehow undermine the sensations and mental state created by the dream monologue, rather than preserving this experience and even enhancing it, as I hoped the lavatory in the back section of Dalha's art gallery would do.

The very reason why I spent my lunchtimes in the surroundings of Dalha's art gallery, which were so different from those of the library, was exactly why I now wanted to use the lavatory in the back 201

section of that art gallery and definitely not the lavatory at the library, even if I was already overdue from my lunch break. And, indeed, this lavatory had the same qualities as the rest of the art gallery, as I hoped it would. The fact that it was located in the back section of the art gallery, a region of mysteries to my mind, was significant. Just outside the door of the lavatory stood a small, cluttered desk upon which was the telephone that Dalha used in her true business of making arrangements. The telephone was centered in the weak light of a desk lamp, and I noticed, as I passed into the lavatory, that it was an unwieldy object with a straight—that is, uncoiled—cord connecting the receiver to the telephone housing, with its enormous dial. But although Dalha answered several calls during the time I was in her lavatory, these seemed to be entirely legitimate conversations having to do either with her personal life or with practical matters relating to the art gallery.

"How long are you going to be in there?" Dalha asked through the door of the lavatory. "I hope you're not sick, because if you're sick you'll have to go somewhere else."

I called out that there was nothing wrong (quite the opposite) and a moment later emerged from the lavatory. I was about to ask for details of the art performance tape I had just heard, anxious to know about the artist and what it would cost me to own the work entitled The Bungalow House, as well as any similar works that might exist. But the phone began ringing

again. Dalha answered it with her customary greeting as I stood by in the back section of the art gallery, which was a dark, though relatively uncluttered, space that now put me in mind of the living room of the bungalow house that I had heard described on the tape-recorded dream monologue. The conversation in which Dalha was engaged (another non-arrangement call) seemed interminable, and I was becoming nervously aware how long past my lunch break I had stayed at the storefront art gallery.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said to Dalha, who responded with a look from her emerald eyes while continuing to speak to the other party on the telephone. And she was smiling at me, like muted laughter, I remember thinking as I passed through the curtained doorway into the front section of the art gallery. I glanced at the tape recorder standing on the plastic table but decided against taking the audiocassette back to the library (and afterward home with me). It would be there when I visited on my lunch break the following day. Hardly 202

anyone ever bought anything out of the front section of Dalha’s art gallery.

For the rest of the day—both at the library and at my home—I thought about the bungalow house tape. Especially while riding the bus home from the library, I thought of the images and concepts described on the tape, as well as the voice that described them and the phrases it used throughout the dream monologue on the bungalow house. Much of my commute from my home to the library, and back home again, took me past numerous streets lined from end to end with desolate-looking houses, any of which might have been the inspiration for the bungalow house audiotape. I say that these streets were lined from “end to end”

with such houses, even though the bus never turned down any of these streets, and I therefore never actually viewed even a single one of them from “end to end”. In fact, as I looked through the window next to my seat on the bus —on either side of the bus I always sat in the window seat, never in the aisle seat—the streets I saw appeared endless, vanishing from my sight toward an infinity of old houses, many of them derelict houses and a great many of them being dwarfish and desolate-looking houses of the bungalow type.

The tape-recorded dream monologue, as I recalled it that day while riding home on the bus and staring out the window, described several features of the infested bungalow house—the dusty window blinds through which the moonlight shone, the lamps with all their lightbulb sockets empty, the threadbare carpet, and the dead or barely living vermin that littered the carpet. The voice on the tape only presented an interior view of the bungalow house, never a view from the exterior. Conversely, the houses I gazed upon with such intensity as I rode the bus to and from the library were only seen by me from an exterior perspective, their interiors being visible solely in my imagination as I projected it into these houses. And my memory of these interiors, once I had emerged from one of my imaginative projections, was always spotty and vague, lacking the precise physical layout provided by the bungalow house audiotape.

Even my recollection of the dreams I often had of these houses was spotty and vague, highly imperfect. Yet the sensations and the mental state created by my imaginative projections into and my dreams of these houses perfectly corresponded to those I experienced at Dalha's art gallery when I listened to the tape entitled The Bungalow House. That feeling of being in a trance among the most vile and pathetic surroundings

was communicated to me in the most powerful way by the voice on the tape, which described a silent and secluded world where one existed in a state of abject hypnosis. While sitting on the floor of the art gallery listening to the voice as it spoke through those enormous headphones, I had the sense not that I was simply hearing the words of that dream monologue but also that I was reading them. What I mean is that whenever I have the occasion to read words on a page, any words on any page, the voice that I hear saying these words in my head is always recognizable in some way as my own, even though the words are those of another. Perhaps it is even more accurate to say that whenever I read words on a page, the voice in my head is my own voice as it becomes merged (or lost) within the words that I am reading. Conversely, when I have the occasion to write words on a page, even a simple note or memo at the library, the voice that I hear dictating these words does not sound like my own—until, of course, I read the words

back to myself, at which time everything is all right again. The bungalow house tape was the most dramatic example of this phenomenon I had ever known.

Despite the poor overall quality of the recording, the distorted voice reading this dream monologue became merged (or lost) within my own perfectly clear voice in my head, even though I was listening to its words over a pair of enormous headphones and not reading the words on a page. As I rode the bus home from the library, observing street after street of houses so reminiscent of the one described on the tape-recorded dream monologue, I regretted not having acquired this artwork on the spot or at least discovered more about it from Dalha, who had been occupied with what seemed an unusual number of telephone calls that afternoon.

The following day at the library I was anxious for lunchtime to arrive so that I could get over to the art gallery and find out everything I possibly could about the bungalow house tape, as well as discuss terms for its acquisition. Entering the art gallery, I immediately looked toward the corner where the tape recorder had been set on the small plastic table the day before. For some reason I was relieved to find the exhibit still in place, as if any artwork in that gallery could possibly have come and gone in a single day.

I walked over to the exhibit with the purpose of verifying that everything I had seen (and heard) the previous day was exactly as I remembered it. I checked that the audio cassette was still inside the recording machine and picked up the little business card on which the

title of the exhibit was given, along with instructions for properly operating the tape-recorded artwork. It was then that I realized that this was a different card from the first one. Printed on this card was the title of a new artwork, which was called The Derelict Factory with a Dirt Floor and Voices.

While I was very excited to find a new work by this artist, I also felt intense apprehension at the absence of the bungalow house dream monologue,

which I had planned to purchase with some extra money I brought with me to the art gallery that day. Just at that moment in which I experienced the dual sensations of excitement and apprehension, Dalha emerged from behind the curtain separating the back and front sections of the art gallery. I had intended to be thoroughly blase in negotiating the purchase of the bungalow house artwork, but Dalha caught me off-guard in a state of disorienting conflict.

“What happened to the bungalow house tape that was here yesterday?” I asked, the tension in my voice betraying desires that were all to her advantage.

“That’s gone now,” she replied in a frigid tone as she walked slowly and pointlessly about the gallery, her emerald skirt and scarves dragging along the floor.

“I don’t understand. It was an artwork exhibited on that small plastic table.”

“Yes,” she agreed.

“Now, after only a single day on exhibit, it’s gone?”

“Yes, it’s gone.”

“Somebody bought it,” I said, assuming the worst.

“No,” she said, “that one was not for sale. It was a performance piece. There was a charge, but you didn’t pay.”

A sickly confusion now became added to the excitement and disappointment already mingling inside me. “There was no notice of a charge for listening to the dream monologue,” I insisted. “As far as I knew, as far as anyone could know, it was an item for sale like everything else in this place.”

“The dream monologue, as you call it, was an exclusive piece. The charge was on the back of the card on which the title was written, just as the charge is on the back of that card you are holding in your hand.”

I turned the card to the reverse side, where the words “twenty-five dollars”

were written in the same hand that appeared on all the price 205

tags around the gallery. Speaking in the tones of an outraged customer, I said to Dalha, “You wrote the price only on this card. There was nothing written on the bungalow house card.” But even as I said these words I lacked the conviction that they were true. In any case, I knew that if I wanted to hear the tape recording about the derelict factory I would have to pay what I owed, or what Dalha claimed I owed, for listening to the bungalow house tape.

“Here,” I said, removing my wallet from my back pocket, “ten, twenty, twenty-five dollars for the bungalow house, and another twenty-five for listening to the tape now in the machine.”

Dalha stepped forward, took the fifty dollars I held out to her, and in her coldest voice said, “This only covers yesterday’s tape about the bungalow house, which was clearly priced at fifty dollars. You must still pay twenty-five dollars if you wish to listen to the tape today.”

“But why should the bungalow house tape cost twenty-five dollars more than the tape about the derelict factory?”

“That is simply because this is a less ambitious work than the bungalow house.”

In fact the tape recording entitled The Derelict Factory with a Dirt Floor and Voices was of shorter duration than The Bungalow House (Plus Silence), but I found it no less wonderful in picturing the same “infinite terror and dreariness”. For approximately fifteen minutes (on my lunch break) I embraced the degraded beauty of the derelict factory— a narrow ruin that stood isolated upon avast plain, its broken windows accepting only the most meager haze of moonlight to shine across its floor of hard-packed dirt where dead machinery lay buried in a grave of shadows and languished in the echoes of hollow, senseless voices. Yet how lucid was the voice that communicated its message to me through the medium of a tape recording. To think that another person shared my love for the icy bleakness of things.

The comfort I felt at hearing that monotonal and somewhat distorted voice singing words that I knew so well—this was an experience that even then, as I sat on the floor of Dalha's art gallery listening to the tape through enormous headphones, might have been heartbreaking. But I wanted to believe that the artist who created these dream monologues about the bungalow house and the derelict factory had not set out to break my heart or anyone's heart. I wanted to believe that this artist had escaped the dreams and demons of all sentiment in order to explore the foul and crummy delights of a universe where everything had been 206

reduced to three stark principles: first, that there was nowhere for you to go; second, that there was nothing for you to do; and third, that there was no one for you to know. Of course I knew that this view was an illusion like any other, but it was also one that had sustained me so long and so well—as long and as well as any other illusion and perhaps longer, perhaps better.

"Dalha," I said when I had finished listening to the tape recording, "I want you to tell me what you know about the artist of these dream monologues. He doesn't even sign his works."

From across the front section of the art gallery Dalha spoke to me in a strange, somewhat flustered voice. "Well, why should you be surprised that he doesn't sign his name to his works—that's how artists are these days. All over the place they are signing their works only with some idiotic symbol or a piece of chewing gum or just leaving them unsigned altogether. Why should you care what his name is? Why should I?"

"Because," I answered, "perhaps I can persuade him to allow me to buy his works instead of sitting on the floor of your art gallery and renting these performances on my lunch break."

"So you want to cut me out entirely," Dalha shouted back in her old voice. "I am his dealer, I tell you, and anything he has to sell you will buy through me."

"I don't know why you're getting so upset," I said, standing up from the floor.

“I’m willing to give you a percentage. All I ask is that you arrange something between myself and the artist.”

Dalha sat down in a chair next to the curtained doorway separating the front and back sections of the art gallery. She pulled her emerald shawl around herself and said, “Even if I wished to arrange something I could not do it. I have no idea what his name is myself. A few nights ago he walked up to me on the street while I was waiting for a cab to take me home.”

“What does he look like?” I had to ask at that moment.

“It was late at night and I was drunk,” Dalha replied, somehow evasively it seemed to me.

“Was he a younger man, an older man?”

“An older man, yes. Not very tall, with bushy white hair like a professor of some kind. And he said that he wanted to have an artwork of his delivered to my gallery. I explained to him my usual terms as best I could, since I was so drunk. He agreed and then walked off down the 207

street. And that’s not the best part of town to be walking around all by yourself. Well, the next day a package arrived with the tape-recording machine and so forth. There were also some instructions which explained that I should destroy each of the audio tapes before I leave the art gallery at the end of the day, and that a new tape would arrive the following day and each day thereafter.

There was no return address on the packages.”

“And did you destroy the bungalow house tape?” I asked.

“Of course,” said Dalha with some exasperation, but also with insistence. “What do I care about some crazy artist’s work or how he conducts his career. Besides, he guaranteed I would make some money on the deal, and here I am already with seventy-five dollars. “

“So why not sell me this dream monologue about the derelict factory? I won’t say anything.”

Dalha was quiet for a moment, and then said, “He told me that if I didn’t destroy the tapes each day he would know about it and that he would do something. I’ve forgotten exactly what he said, I was so drunk that night.”

“But how could he know?” I asked, and in reply Dalha just stared at me in silence. “All right, all right,” I said. “But I still want you to make an arrangement. You have his money for the bungalow house tape and the tape about the derelict factory. If he’s any kind of artist, he’ll want to be paid. When he gets in touch with you, that’s when you make the arrangement for me. I won’t cheat you out of your percentage. I give you my word on that.

“Whatever that’s worth,” Dalha said bitterly.

But she did agree that she would try to arrange something between myself and the tape-recording artist. I left the art gallery immediately after these negotiations, before Dalha could have any second thoughts. That afternoon, while I was working in the Language and Literature department of the library, I could think about nothing but the derelict factory that was so enticingly pictured on the new audiotape. The bus that takes me to and from the library each day of the working week always passes such a structure, which stands isolated in the distance just as the artist described it in his dream monologue.

That night I slept badly, thrashing about in my bed, not quite asleep and not quite awake. At times I had the feeling there was someone else in my bedroom who was talking to me, but of course I

could not deal with this perception in any realistic way, since I was half-asleep and half-awake, and thus, for all practical purposes, I was out of my mind.”

Around three o’clock in the morning the telephone rang. In the darkness I reached for my eyeglasses, which were on the nightstand next to the

telephone, and noted the luminous face of my alarm clock. I cleared my throat and said hello. The voice on the other end said hello back to me. It was Dalha.

“I talked to him,” she said.

“Where did you talk to him?” I asked. “On the street?”

“No, no, not on the street,” she said, giggling a little. I think she must have been drunk. “He called me on the telephone.”

“He called you on the telephone?” I repeated, imagining for a moment what it would be like to have the voice of that artist speak to me over the telephone and not merely on a recorded audiotape.

“Yes, he called me on the telephone.”

“What did he say?”

“Well, I could tell you if you would stop asking so many questions.”

“Tell me.”

“It was only a few minutes ago that he called. He said that he would meet you tomorrow at the library where you work.”

“You told him about me?” I asked, and then there was a long silence. “Dalha?” I prompted.

“Yes, I told him about you. But I never knew what you did for a living. How long have you worked at the library?”

“Fifteen years. Did he say anything else to you?” I asked Dalha.

“No, nothing.”

“Maybe it was only a coincidence that he said he would meet me at the library and that I also work at the library,” I said. “People meet all the time at the library. I see them meeting there everyday.”

“Of course they do,” said Dalha, a little patronizing it seemed for someone who was so drunk at three o’clock in the morning. Then she said good-bye and hung up before I could say good-bye back to her.

After talking to Dalha I found it impossible to sleep anymore that night, even if it was only a state of half-sleeping and half-waking. All I could think about was meeting the artist of the dream monologues. So I got myself ready to go to work, rushing as if I were late, and walked up to the corner of my street to wait for the bus.

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It was very cold as I sat waiting in the bus shelter. There was a sliver of moon high in the blackness above, with several hours remaining before sunrise.

Somehow I felt that I was waiting for the bus on the first day of a new schoolyear, since after all the month was September, and I was so filled with both fear and excitement. When the bus finally arrived I saw that there were only a few other early risers headed for downtown. I took one of the back seats and stared out the window, my own face staring back at me in black reflection.

At the next shelter we approached I noticed that another lone bus rider was seated on the bench waiting to be picked up. His clothes were dark colored (including a long loose overcoat and hat), and he sat up very straight, his arms held close to the body and his hands resting on his lap. His head was slightly bowed, and I could not see the face beneath his hat. His physical attitude, I thought to myself as we approached the lighted bus shelter, was one of disciplined repose. I was surprised that he did not stand up as the bus came nearer to the shelter, and ultimately we passed him by. I wanted to say something to the driver of the bus but a strong feeling of both fear and excitement made me keep my silence.

The bus finally dropped me off in front of the library, and I ran up the tiered stairway that led to the main entrance. Through the thick glass doors I could see that only a few lights illuminated the spacious interior of the library.

After rapping on the glass for a few moments I saw a figure dressed in a maintenance man's uniform appear in the shadowy distance inside the building. I rapped some more and the man slowly proceeded down the library's vaulted central hallway.

"Good morning, Henry," I said as the door opened.

"Hello, sir," he replied without standing aside to allow my entrance to the library. "You know I'm not supposed to open these doors before it's time for them to be open."

"I'm a little early, I realize, but I'm sure it will be all right to let me inside. I work here, after all."

"I know you do, sir. But a few days ago I got talked to about these doors being open when they shouldn't be. It's because of the stolen property."

"What property is that, Henry? Books?"

"No, sir. I think it was something from the media department. Maybe a video camera or a tape recorder, I don't know exactly."

"Well, you have my word—just let me through the door and I'll go right upstairs to my desk. I've got a lot of work to do today."

Henry eventually obliged my request, and I did as I told him I would do.

The library was a great building as a whole, but the Language and Literature department (second floor) was located in a relatively small area —narrow and long with a high ceiling and a row of tall, paned windows along one wall. The other walls were lined with books, and most of the floor space was devoted to long study tables. For the most part, though, the room in which I worked was fairly open from end to end. Two large archways led to other parts of the library, and a normalsized doorway led to the stacks where most of the bibliographic holdings were stored, millions of volumes standing silent and out of sight along endless rows of shelves. In

the pre-dawn darkness the true dimensions of the Language and Literature department were now obscure. Only the moon shining high in the blackness through those tall windows revealed to me the location of my desk, which was in the middle of the long narrow room.

I found my way over to my desk and switched on the small lamp that years ago I had brought from home. (Not that I required the added illumination as I worked at my desk at the library, but I did enjoy the bleakly old-fashioned appearance of this object.) For a moment I thought of the bungalow house where none of the lamps were equipped with lightbulbs and moonlight shone through the windows upon a carpet littered with vermin. Somehow I was unable to call up the special sensations and mental state that I associated with this dream monologue, even though my present situation of being alone in the Language and Literature department some hours before dawn was intensely dreamlike.

Not knowing what else to do, I sat down at my desk as if I were beginning my normal workday. It was then that I noticed a large envelope lying on top of my desk, although I could not recall its being there when I left the library the day before. The envelope looked old and faded under the dim light of the desk lamp. There was no writing on either side of the envelope, which was bulging slightly and had been sealed.

“Who’s there?” a voice called out that barely sounded like my own. I had seen something out of the corner of my eye while examining the envelope at my desk. I cleared my throat. “Henry?” I

asked the darkness without looking up from my desk or turning to either side. No answer was offered in reply, but I could feel that someone else had joined me in the Language and Literature department of the library.

I slowly turned my head to the right and focused on the archway some distance across the room. At the center of this aperture, which led to another room where moonlight shone through high, paned windows, stood a figure in silhouette. I could not see his face but immediately recognized the long, loose overcoat and hat. It was indeed the one whom I saw in the bus shelter

as I rode to the library in the pre-dawn darkness. Now he was there to meet me that day in the library, as he had told Dalha he would do. At that moment it seemed beside the point to ask how he had gotten into the library or even to bother about introductions. I simply launched into a monologue that I had been constantly rehearsing since Dalha telephoned me earlier that morning.

"I've been wanting to meet you," I started. "Your dream monologues, which is what I call them, have impressed me very much. That is to say, your artworks are like nothing else I have ever experienced, either artistically or extra-artistically. It seems incredible to me how well you have expressed subject matter with which I myself am intimately familiar. Of course, I am not referring to the subject matter as such—the bungalow house and so on—except as it calls forth your underlying vision of things. When—in your tape-recorded monologues—your voice speaks such phrases as 'infinite terror and dreariness'

or 'ceaseless negation of color and life', I believe that my response is exactly that which you intend for those who experience your artworks, perhaps even that which you yourself have experienced that gives source of inspiration for your artworks."

I continued in this vein for a while longer, speaking to the silhouette of someone who betrayed no sign that he heard anything I said. At some point, however, my monologue veered off in a direction I had not intended it to take.

Suddenly I began to say things that had nothing to do with what I had said before and that even contradicted my former statements.

"For as long as I can remember," I said, continuing to speak to the figure standing in the archway, "I have had an intense and highly aesthetic perception of what I call the icy bleakness of things. At the same time I have felt a great loneliness in this perception. This

conjunction of feelings seems paradoxical, since such a perception, such a view of things, would seem to preclude the emotion of loneliness, or any sense of a killing sadness; as I think of it. All such heartbreaking sentiment, as usually considered, would seem to be on its knees before artworks such as yours, which so powerfully express what I have called the icy bleakness of things, submerging or devastating all sentiment in an atmosphere potent with desolate truths, permeated throughout with a visionary stagnation and lifelessness. Yet I must observe that the effect, as I now consider it, has been just the opposite. If it was your intent to evoke the icy bleakness of things with your dream monologues, then you have totally failed on both an artistic and an extra-artistic level.

You have failed your art, you have failed yourself, and you have also failed me.

If your artworks had really evoked the bleakness of things, then I would not have felt this need to know who you are, this killing sadness that there was actually someone who experienced the same sensations and mental states that I did and who could share them with me in the form of tape-recorded dream monologues. Who are you that I should feel this need to go to work hours before the sun comes up, that I should feel this was something I had to do and that you were someone that I had to know? This behavior violates every principle by which I have lived for as long as I can remember. Who are you to cause me to violate these longlived principles? I think it's all becoming clear to me now. Dalha put you up to this. You and Dalha are in a conspiracy against me and against my principles. Every day Dalha is on the telephone making all kinds of arrangements for profit, and she cannot stand the idea that all I do is sit there in peace, eating my lunch in her hideous art gallery. She feels that I'm cheating her somehow because she's not making a profit from me, because I never paid her to make an arrangement for me. Don't try to deny what I now know is true. But you could say something, in any case. Just a few words spoken with that voice of yours. Or at least let me see your face. And you could take off that ridiculous hat. It's like something Dalha would wear."

By this time I was on my feet and walking (staggering, in fact) toward the figure that stood in the archway. All the while I walking, or staggering,

toward the figure I was also demanding that he answer my accusations. But as I walked forward between the long study tables toward the archway, the figure standing there receded backward into the darkness of the next room, where moonlight shone through high,

paned windows. The closer I came to him the farther he receded into the darkness. And he did not recede into the darkness by taking steps backward, as I was taking steps forward, but moved in some other way that even now I cannot specify, as though he were floating.

Just before the figure disappeared completely into the darkness he finally spoke to me. His voice was the same one that I had heard over those enormous headphones in Dalha's art gallery, except now there was no interference, no distortion in the words that it spoke. These words, which resounded in my brain as they resounded in the high-ceilinged rooms of the library, were such that I should have welcomed them, for they echoed my very own, deeply private principles. Yet I took no comfort in hearing another voice tell me that there was nowhere for me to go, nothing for me to do, and no one for me to know.

The next voice I heard was that of Henry, who shouted up the wide stone staircase from the ground floor of the library. "Is everything all right, sir?"

he asked. I composed myself and was able to answer that everything was all right. I asked him to turn the lights on for the second floor of the library. In a minute the lights were on, but by then the man in the hat and long, loose overcoat was gone.

When I confronted Dalha at her art gallery later that day, she was not in the least forthcoming with respect to my questions and accusations. "You're crazy,"

she screamed at me. "I want nothing more to do with you."

When I asked Dalha what she was talking about, she said, "You really don't know, do you? You really are a crazy man. You don't remember that night

you came up to me on the street while I was waiting for a cab to show up."

When I told her I recalled doing nothing of the kind, she continued her anecdote of that night, and also subsequent events. "I'm so drunk I can hardly understand what you're saying to me about some little game you are playing. Then you send me the tapes. Then you come in and pay to listen to the tapes, exactly as you said you would. Just in time I remember that I'm supposed to lie to you that the tapes are the work of a white-haired old man, when in fact you're the one who's making the tapes. I knew you were crazy, but this was the only money I ever made off you, even though day after day you come and eat your pathetic lunch in my gallery. When I saw you that night, I couldn't tell at first who it was walking up to me on the street.

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You did look different, and you were wearing that stupid hat. Soon enough, though, I can see that it's you. And you're pretending to be someone else, but not really pretending, I don't know. And then you tell me that I must destroy the tapes, and if I don't destroy them something will happen. Well, let me tell you, crazy man," Dalha said, "I did not destroy those tape recordings. I let all my friends hear them. We sat around getting drunk and laughing our heads off at your stupid dream monologues. Here, another one of your artworks arrived in the mail today," she said while walking across the floor of the art gallery to the tape machine that was positioned on the small plastic table. "Why don't you listen to it and pay me the money you promised. This looks like agood one," she said, picking up the little card that bore the title of the work. "The Bus Shelter, it says. That should be very exciting for you—a bus shelter. Pay up!"

"Dalha," I said in a laboriously calm voice, "please listen to me. You have to make another arrangement. I need to have another meeting with the tape-recording artist. You're the only one who can arrange for this to happen. Dalha, I'm afraid for both of us if you don't agree to make this arrangement. I need to speak with him again."

"Then why don't you just go talk into a mirror. There," she said, pointing to the curtain that separated the front section from the back section of the art

gallery. “Go into the bathroom like you did the other day and talk to yourself in the mirror.”

“I didn’t talk to myself in the bathroom, Dalha.”

“No? What were you doing then?”

“Dalha, you have to make the arrangement. You are the go-between. He will contact you if you agree to let him.”

“Who will contact me?”

This was a fair question for Dalha to ask, but it was also one that I could not answer. I told her that I would return to talk to her the next day, hoping she would have calmed down by then.

Unfortunately, I never saw Dalha again. That night she was found dead on the street. Presumably she had been waiting for a cab to take her home from a bar or a party or some other human gathering place where she had gotten very drunk. But it was not her drinking or her exhausting bohemian social life that killed Dalha. She had, in fact, choked to death while waiting for a cab very late at night. Her body was taken to a hospital for examination. There it was discovered that

an object had been lodged inside her. Someone, it appeared, had violently thrust something down her throat. The object, as described in a newspaper article, was the “small plastic arm of a toy doll”. Whether this doll’s arm had been painted emerald green, or any other color, was not mentioned by the article. Surely the police searched through Dalha D. Fine Arts and found many more such objects arranged in a wire wastebasket, each of them painted different colors. No doubt they also found the exhibit of the dream monologues with its unsigned artworks and tape recorder stolen from the library. But they could never have made the connection between these tape-recorded artworks and the grotesque death of the gallery owner.

After that night I no longer felt the desperate need to possess the monologues, not even the final bus shelter tape, which I have never heard. I was now in possession of the original handwritten manuscripts from which the tape-recording artist had created his dream monologues and which he had left for me in a large envelope on my desk at the library. Even then he knew, as I did not know, that after our first meeting we would never meet again. The handwriting on the manuscript pages is somewhat like my own, although the slant of the letters betrays a left-handed writer, whereas I am righthanded. Over and over I read the dream monologues about the bus shelter and the derelict factory and especially about the bungalow house, where the moonlight shines upon a carpet littered with the bodies of vermin. I try to experience the infinite terror and dreariness of a bungalow universe in the way I once did, but it is not the same as it once was. There is no comfort in it, even though the vision and the underlying principles are still the same. I know in a way I never knew before that there is nowhere for me to go, nothing for me to do, and no one for me to know. The voice in my head keeps reciting these old principles of mine. The voice is his voice, and the voice is also my voice. And there are other voices, voices I have never heard before, voices that seem to be either dead or dying in agreat moonlit darkness. More than ever, some sort of new arrangement seems in order, some dramatic and unknown arrangement—anything to find release from this heartbreaking sadness I suffer every minute of the day (and night), this killing sadness that feels as if it will never leave me no matter where I go or what I do or whom I may ever know.

Teatro Grottesco

The first thing I learned was that no one anticipates the arrival of the Teatro.

One would not say, or even think, “The Teatro has never come to this city—it seems we’re due for a visit,” or perhaps, “Don’t be surprised when you-know-what turns up, it’s been years since the last time.” Even if the city in which one lives is exactly the kind of place favored by the Teatro, there can be no basis for predicting its appearance. No warnings are given, no fanfare to announce that a Teatro season is about to begin, or that another season of that sort will soon be upon us. But if a particular city possesses what is sometimes called an “artistic underworld,” and if one is in close touch with this society of artists, the chances are optimal for being among those who discover that things have already started. This is the most one can expect.

For a time it was all rumors and lore, hearsay and dreams. Anyone who failed to show up for a few days at the usual club or bookstore or special artistic event was the subject of speculation. But most of the crowd I am referring to lead highly unstable, even precarious lives. Any of them might pack up and disappear without notifying a single soul. And almost all of the supposedly “missing ones”

were, at some point, seen again. One such person was a filmmaker whose short movie Private Hellserved as the featured subject of a local one-night festival.

But he was nowhere to be seen either during the exhibition or at the party afterwards. “Gone with the Teatro,” someone said with a blase knowingness, while others smiled and clinked glasses in a sardonic farewell toast.

But only a week later the filmmaker was spotted in one of the back rows of a pornographic theater. He later explained his absence by insisting he had been in the hospital following a thorough beating at 217

the hands of some people he had been filming but who did not consent or desire to be filmed. This sounded plausible, given the subject matter of the

man’s work. Yet for some reason no one believed his hospital story, despite the evidence of bandages he was still required to wear. “It has to be the Teatro,”

argued a woman who always dressed in shades of purple and who was a good friend of the filmmaker. “His stuff and Teatro stuff,” she said, holding up two crossed fingers for everyone to see.

But what was meant by “Teatro stuff?” This was a phrase I heard spoken by a number of persons, not all of them artists of a pretentious or self-dramatizing type. Certainly there is no shortage of anecdotes that have been passed around which purport to illuminate the nature and workings of this “cruel troupe,” an epithet used by those who are too superstitious to invoke the Teatro Grottesco by name. But sorting out these accounts into a coherent profile, never mind their truth value, is another thing altogether.

For instance, the purple woman I mentioned earlier held us all spellbound one evening with a story about her cousin’s roommate, a self-styled “visceral artist” who worked the night shift as a stock clerk for a supermarket chain in the suburbs. On a December morning, about an hour before sun-up, the artist was released from work and began his walk home through a narrow alley that ran behind several blocks of various stores and businesses along the suburb’s main avenue. A light snow had fallen during the night, settling evenly upon the pavement of the alley and glowing in the light of a full moon which seemed to hover just at the alley’s end. The artist saw a figure in the distance, and something about this figure, this winter-morning vision, made him pause for a moment and stare. Although he had a trained eye for sizing and perspective, the artist found this silhouette of a person in the distance of the alley intensely problematic. He could not tell if it was short or tall, or even if it was moving—either toward him or away from him—or was standing still. Then, in a moment of hallucinated wonder, the figure stood before him in the middle of the alley.

The moonlight illuminated a little man who was entirely unclothed and who held out both of his hands as if he were grasping at a desired object just out of his reach. But the artist saw that something was wrong with these hands. While the little man’s body was pale, his hands were dark and were too large for the tiny arms on which they

hung. At first the artist believed the little man to be wearing oversized mittens. His hands seemed to be covered by some kind of fuzz, just as the alley in which he stood was layered with the fuzziness of the snow that had fallen during the night. His hands looked soft and fuzzy like the snow, except that the snow was white and his hands were black.

In the moonlight the artist came to see that the mittens worn by this little man were actually something like the paws of an animal. It almost made sense to the artist to have thought that the little man's hands were actually paws which had only appeared to be two black mittens. Then each of the paws separated into long thin fingers that wriggled wildly in the moonlight. But they could not have been the fingers of a hand, because there were too many of them. And the hands were not paws, nor were the paws really mittens. And all of this time the little man was becoming smaller and smaller in the moonlight of that alley, as if he were moving into the distance far away from the artist who was hypnotized by this vision. Finally a little voice spoke which the artist could barely hear, and it said to him: "I cannot keep them away from me anymore, I am becoming so small and weak." These words suddenly made this whole winter-morning scenario into something that was too much even for the self-styled "visceral artist."

In the pocket of his coat the artist had a tool which he used for cutting open boxes at the supermarket. He had cut into flesh in the past, and, with the moonlight glaring upon the snow of that alley, the artist made a few strokes which turned that white world red. Under the circumstances what he had done seemed perfectly justified to the artist, even an act of mercy. The man was becoming so small.

Afterward the artist ran through the alley without stopping until he reached the rented house where he lived with his roommate. It was she who telephoned the police, saying there was a body lying in the snow at such and such a place and then hanging up without giving her name. For days, weeks, the artist and his roommate searched the local newspapers for some word of the extraordinary thing the police must have found in that alley. But nothing ever appeared.

“You see how these incidents are hushed up,” the purple woman whispered to us.

“The police know what is going on. There are even special police for dealing with such matters. But nothing is made public, no one is questioned. And yet, after that morning in the alley, my cousin and her roommate came under surveillance and were followed

everywhere by unmarked cars. Because these special policemen know that it is artists, or highly artistic persons, who are approached by the Teatro. And they know whom to watch after something has happened. It is said that these police may be party to the deeds of that ‘company of nightmares’.”

But none of us believed a word of this Teatro anecdote told by the purple woman, just as none of us believed the purple woman’s friend, the filmmaker, when he denied all innuendos that connected him to the Teatro. On the one hand, our imaginations had sided with this woman when she asserted that her friend, the creator of the short movie Private Hell, was somehow in league with the Teatro; on the other hand, we were mockingly dubious of the story about her cousin’s roommate, the self-styled visceral artist, and his encounter in the snow-covered alley.

This divided reaction was not as natural as it seemed. Never mind that the case of the filmmaker was more credible than that of the visceral artist, if only because the first story was lacking the extravagant details which burdened the second. Until then we had uncritically relished all we had heard about the Teatro, no matter how bizarre these accounts may have been and no matter how much they opposed a verifiable truth or even a coherent portrayal of this phenomenon. As artists we suspected that it was in our interest to have our heads filled with all kinds of Teatro craziness. Even I, a writer of nihilistic prose works, savored the inconsistency and the flamboyant absurdity of what was told to me across a table in a quiet library or a noisy club. In a word, I delighted in the unreality of the Teatro stories. The truth they carried, if any, was immaterial. And we never questioned any of them until the purple woman related the episode of the visceral artist and the small man in the alley.

But this new disbelief was not in the least inspired by our sense of reason or reality. It was in fact based solely on fear; it was driven by the will to negate what one fears. No one gives up on something until it turns on them, whether or not that thing is real or unreal. In some way all of this Teatro business had finally worn upon our nerves; the balance had been tipped between a madness that intoxicated us and one that began to menace our minds. As for the woman who always dressed herself in shades of purple … we avoided her. It would have been typical of the Teatro, someone said, to use a person like that for their purposes.

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Perhaps our judgment of the purple woman was unfair. No doubt her theories concerning the "approach of the Teatro" made us all uneasy. But was this reason enough to cast her out from that artistic underworld which was the only society available to her? Like many societies, of course, ours was founded on fearful superstition, and this is always reason enough for any kind of behavior. She had been permanently stigmatized by too closely associating herself with something unclean in its essence. Because even after her theories were discredited by a newly circulated Teatro tale, her status did not improve.

I am now referring to a story that was going around in which an artist was not approached by the Teatro but rather took the first step toward the Teatro, as if acting under the impulse of a sovereign will.

The artist in this case was a photographer of the I-am-a-camera type. He was a studiedly bloodless specimen who quite often, and for no apparent reason, would begin to stare at someone and to continue staring until that person reacted in some manner, usually by fleeing the scene but on occasion by assaulting the photographer, who invariably pressed charges. It was therefore not entirely surprising to learn that he tried to engage the services of the Teatro in the way he did, for it was his belief that this cruel troupe could be hired to, in the photographer's words, "utterly destroy someone." And the person he wished to destroy was his landlord, a small balding man with a mustache who, after the photographer had moved out of his apartment, refused to remit his security deposit, perhaps with good reason but perhaps not.

In any case, the photographer, whose name incidentally was Spence, made inquiries about the Teatro over a period of some months. Following up every scrap of information, no matter how obscure or suspect, the tenacious Spence ultimately arrived in the shopping district of an old suburb where there was a two-story building that rented space to various persons and businesses, including a small video store, a dentist, and, as it was spelled out on the building's directory, the Theatre Grottesco. At the back of the first floor, directly below a studio for dancing instruction, was a small suite of offices whose glass door displayed some stencilled lettering that read: T G VENTURES.

Seated at a desk in the reception area behind the glass door was a young woman with long black hair and black-rimmed eyeglasses. She was thoroughly engrossed in writing

something on a small blank card, several more of which were spread across her desk. The way Spence told it, he was undeterred by all appearances that seemed to suggest the Teatro, or Theatre, was not what he assumed it was. He entered the reception area of the office, stood before the desk of the young woman, and introduced himself by name and occupation, believing it important to communicate as soon as possible his identity as an artist, or at least imply as best he could that he was a highly artistic photographer, which undoubtedly he was. When the young woman adjusted her eyeglasses and asked, "How can I help you?" the photographer Spence leaned toward her and whispered, "I would like to enlist the services of the Teatro, or Theatre if you like." When the receptionist asked what he was planning, the photographer answered, "To utterly destroy someone."

The young woman was absolutely unflustered, according to Spence, by this declaration. She began calmly gathering the small blank cards that were spread across her desk and, while doing this, explained that T G Ventures was, in her words, an "entertainment service." After placing the small blank cards to one side, she removed from her desk a folded brochure which outlined the nature of the business, which provided clowns, magicians, and novelty performances for a variety of occasions, their specialty being children's parties.

As Spence studied the brochure, the receptionist placidly sat with her hands folded and gazed at him from within the black frames of her eyeglasses. The light in that suburban office suite was bright but not harsh; the pale walls were incredibly clean and the carpeting, in Spence's description, was conspicuously new and displayed the exact shade of purple found in turnips. The photographer said that he felt as if he were standing in a mirage. "This is all a front," Spence finally said, throwing the brochure on the receptionist's desk.

But the young woman only picked up the brochure and placed it back in the same drawer from which it had come. "What's behind that door?" Spence demanded, pointing across the room. And just as he pointed at that door there was a sound on the other side of it, a brief rumbling as if something heavy had just fallen to the floor. "The dancing classes," said the receptionist, her right index finger pointing up at the floor above. "Perhaps," Spence allowed, but he claimed that this sound that he heard, which he described as having an "abysmal resonance," caused a sudden rise of panic within him. He tried not to move from the place he was standing, but his body was overwhelmed by the 222

impulse to leave that suite of offices. The photographer turned away from the receptionist and saw his reflection in the glass door. She was watching him from behind the lenses of black-framed eyeglasses, and the stencilled lettering on the glass door read backwards, as if in a mirror. A few seconds later Spence was outside the building in the old suburb. All the way home, he asserted, his heart was pounding.

The following day Spence paid a visit to his landlord's place of business, which was a tiny office in a seedy downtown building. Having given up on the Teatro, he would have to deal in his own way with this man who would not return his security deposit. Spence's strategy was to plant himself in his landlord's office and stare him into submission with a photographer's unnerving gaze. After he arrived at his landlord's rented office on the sixth floor of what was a thoroughly depressing downtown building, Spence seated himself in a chair looking across a filthy desk at a small balding man with a mustache. But the man merely looked back at the photographer. To make things worse, the landlord (whose name was Herman Zick), would

lean towards Spence every so often and in a quiet voice say, “It’s all perfectly legal, you know.” Then Spence would continue his staring, which he was frustrated to find ineffective against this man Zick, who of course was not an artist, or even a highly artistic person, as were the usual victims of the photographer. Thus the battle kept up for almost an hour, the landlord saying, “It’s all perfectly legal,” and Spence trying to hold a fixed gaze upon the man he wished to utterly destroy.

Ultimately Spence was the first to lose control. He jumped out of the chair in which he was sitting and began to shout incoherently at the landlord. Once Spence was on his feet, Zick swiftly maneuvered around the desk and physically evicted the photographer from the tiny office, locking him out in the hallway.

Spence said that he was in the hallway for only a second or two when the doors opened to the elevator that was directly across from Zick’s sixth-floor office.

Out of the elevator compartment stepped a middle-aged man in a dark suit and black-framed eyeglasses. He wore a full, well-groomed beard which, Spence observed, was slightly streaked with gray. In his left hand the gentleman was clutching a crumpled brown bag, holding it a few inches in front of him. He walked up to the door of the landlord’s office and with his right hand grasped the round black doorknob, jiggling it back and forth several times. There was a loud click that echoed down the hallway of that old downtown building. The 223

gentleman turned his head and looked at Spence for the first time, smiling briefly before admitting himself to the office of Herman Zick.

Again the photographer experienced that surge of panic he had felt the day before when he visited the suburban offices of T G Ventures. He pushed the down button for the elevator, and while waiting he listened at the door of the landlord’s office. What he heard, Spence claimed, was that terrible sound that had sent him running out in the street from T G Ventures, that “abysmal resonance,” as he defined it. Suddenly the gentleman with the well-groomed beard and black-rimmed glasses emerged from the tiny office. The door to the elevator had just opened, and the man walked

straight past Spence to board the empty compartment. Spence himself did not get on the elevator but stood outside, helplessly staring at the bearded gentleman, who was still holding that small crumpled bag. A split second before the elevator doors slid closed, the gentleman looked directly at Spence and winked at him. It was the assertion of the photographer that this wink, executed from behind a pair of black-framed eyeglasses, made a mechanical clicking sound which echoed down the dim hallway.

Prior to his exit from the old downtown building, leaving by way of the stairs rather than the elevator, Spence tried the door to his landlord's office. He found it unlocked and cautiously stepped inside. But there was no one on the other side of the door.

The conclusion to the photographer's adventure took place a full week later.

Delivered by regular post to his mail box was a small square envelope with no return address. Inside was a photograph. He brought this item to Des Esseintes'

Library, a bookstore where several of us were giving a late-night reading of our latest literary efforts. A number of persons belonging to the local artistic underworld, including myself, saw the photograph and heard Spence's rather frantic account of the events surrounding it. The photo was of Spence himself staring stark-eyed into the camera, which apparently had taken the shot from inside an elevator, a panel of numbered buttons being partially visible along the righthand border of the picture. "I could see no camera," Spence kept repeating. "But that wink he gave me … and what's written on the reverse side of this thing." Turning over the photo Spence read aloud the following handwritten inscription: "The little man is so much littler these days. Soon he will know about the soft black stars. And your payment is past due." Someone then asked Spence what they had to say about all this at the offices of 224

T G Ventures. The photographer's head swivelled slowly in exasperated negation.

"Not there anymore," he said over and over. With the single exception of myself, that night at Des Esseintes' Library was the last time anyone saw

Mr. Spence.

After the photographer ceased to show up at the usual meeting places and special artistic events, there were no cute remarks about his having “gone with the Teatro.” We were all of us beyond that stage. I was perversely proud to note that a degree of philosophical maturity had now developed among those in the artistic underworld of which I was a part. There is nothing like fear to complicate one’s consciousness, inducing previously unknown levels of reflection. Under such mental stress I began to organize my own thoughts and observations about the Teatro, specifically as this phenomenon related to the artists who seemed to be its sole objects of attention.

Whether or not an artist was approached by the Teatro or took the initiative to approach the Teatro himself, it seemed the effect was the same: the end of an artist’s work. I myself verified this fact as thoroughly as I could. The filmmaker whose short movie Private Hell so many of us admired had, by all accounts, become a full-time dealer in pornographic videos, none of them his own productions. The selfnamed visceral artist had publicly called an end to those stunts of his which had gained him a modest underground reputation. According to his roommate, the purple woman’s cousin, he was now managing the supermarket where he had formerly labored as a stock clerk. As for the purple woman herself, who was never much praised as an artist and whose renown effectively began and ended with the “cigar box assemblage” phase of her career, she had gone into selling real estate, an occupation in which she became quite a success. This roster of ex-artists could be extended considerably, I am sure of that. But for the purposes of this report or confession (or whatever else you would like to call it) I must end my list of no-longer-artistic persons with myself, while attempting to offer some insights into the manner in which the Teatro Grottesco could transform a writer of nihilistic prose works into a non-artistic, more specifically & post-artistic being.

It was after the disappearance of the photographer Spence that my intuitions concerning the Teatro began to crystalize and become explicit thoughts, a dubious process but one to which I am inescapably subject as a prose writer.

Until that point in time, everyone tacitly assumed that there was an intimacy of kind between the Teatro and

the artists who were either approached by the Teatro or who themselves approached this cruel troupe by means of some overture, as in the case of Spence, or perhaps by gestures more subtle, even purely noetic (I retreat from writing unconscious, although others might argue with my intellectual reserve).

Many of us even spoke of the Teatro as a manifestation of superart, a term which we always left conveniently nebulous. However, following the disappearance of the photographer, all knowledge I had acquired about the Teatro, fragmentary as it was, became configured in a completely new pattern. I mean to say that I no longer considered it possible that the Teatro was in anyway related to a superart, or to an art of any kind, quite the opposite in fact. To my mind the Teatro was, and is, a phenomenon intensely destructive of everything that I conceived of as art. Therefore, the Teatro was, and is, intensely destructive of all artists and even of highly artistic persons. Whether this destructive force is a matter of intention or is an epiphenomenon of some unrelated, perhaps greater design, or even if there exists anything like an intention or design on the part of the Teatro, I have no idea (at least none I can elaborate in comprehensible terms). Nonetheless, I feel certain that for an artist to encounter the Teatro there can be only one consequence: the end of that artist's work. Strange, then, that knowing this fact I still acted as I did.

I cannot say if it was I who approached the Teatro or vice versa, as if any of that stupidness made a difference. The important thing is that from the moment I perceived the Teatro to be a profoundly antiartistic phenomenon I conceived the ambition to make my form of art, by which I mean my nihilistic prose writings, into an antiTeatro phenomenon. In order to do this, of course, I required a penetrating knowledge of the Teatro Grottesco, or of some significant aspect of that cruel troupe, an insight of a deeply subtle, even dreamlike variety into its nature and workings.

The photographer Spence had made a great visionary advance when he intuited that it was in the nature of the Teatro to act on his request to utterly destroy someone (although the exact meaning of the statement “he will know about the soft black stars,” in reference to Spence’s landlord, became known to both of us only sometime later). I realized that I would need to make a similar leap of insight in my own mind. While I had already perceived the Teatro to be a profoundly antiartistic phenomenon, I was not yet sure what in the 226

world would constitute an antiTeatro phenomenon, as well as how in the world I could turn my own prose writings to such a purpose.

Thus, for several days I mediated on these questions. As usual, the psychic demands of this meditation severely taxed my bodily processes, and in my weakened state I contracted a virus, specifically an intestinal virus, which confined me to my small apartment for a period of one week. Nonetheless, it was during this time that things fell into place regarding the Teatro and the insights I required to oppose this company of nightmares in a more or less efficacious manner.

Suffering through the days and nights of an illness, especially an intestinal virus, one becomes highly conscious of certain realities, as well as highly sensitive to the functions of these realities, which otherwise are not generally subject to prolonged attention or meditation. Upon recovery from such a virus, the consciousness of these realities and their functions necessarily fades, so that the once-stricken person may resume his life’s activities and not be driven to insanity or suicide by the acute awareness of these most unpleasant facts of existence. Through the illumination of analogy, I came to understand that the Teatro operated in much the same manner as the illness from which I recently suffered, with the consequence that the person exposed to the Teatro disease becomes highly conscious of certain realities and their functions, ones quite different of course from the realities and functions of an intestinal virus.

However, an intestinal virus ultimately succumbs, in a reasonably healthy individual, to the formation of antibodies (or something of that sort). But the disease of the Teatro, I now understood, was a disease for which no counteracting agents, or antibodies, had ever been created by the systems of

the individuals—that is, the artists—it attacked. An encounter with any disease, including an intestinal virus, serves to alter a person's mind, making it intensely aware of certain realities, but this mind cannot remain altered once this encounter has ended or else that person will never be able to go on living in the same way as before. In contrast, an encounter with the Teatro appears to remain within one's system and to alter a person's mind permanently. For the artist the result is not to be driven into insanity or suicide (as might be the case if one assumed a permanent mindfulness of an intestinal virus) but the absolute termination of that artist's work. The simple reason for this effect is that there are no antibodies for the disease of the Teatro, and therefore no relief from the consciousness of the realities which an encounter with the Teatro has forced upon an artist.

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Having progressed this far in my contemplation of the Teatro— so that I might discover its nature or essence and thereby make my prose writings into an antiTeatro phenomenon—I found that I could go no further. No matter how much thought and meditation I devoted to the subject I did not gain a definite sense of having revealed to myself the true realities and functions that the Teatro communicated to an artist and how this communication put an end to that artist's work. Of course I could vaguely imagine the species of awareness that might render an artist thenceforth incapable of producing any type of artistic efforts. I actually arrived at a fairly detailed and disturbing idea of such an awareness—a world-awareness, as I conceived it. Yet I did not feel I had penetrated the mystery of "Teatro-stuff." And the only way to know about the Teatro, it seemed, was to have an encounter with it. Such an encounter between myself and the Teatro would have occurred in any event as a result of the discovery that my prose writings had been turned into an antiTeatro phenomenon: this would constitute an approach of the most outrageous sort to that company of nightmares, forcing an encounter with all its realities and functions. Thus it was not necessary, at this point in my plan, to have actually succeeded in making my prose writings into an antiTeatro phenomenon. I simply had to make it known, falsely, that I had done so.

As soon as I had sufficiently recovered from my intestinal virus I began to spread the word. Every time I found myself among others who belonged to the so-called artistic underworld of this city I bragged that I had gained the most intense awareness of the Teatro's realities and functions, and that, far from finishing me off as an artist, I had actually used this awareness as inspiration for a series of short prose works. I explained to my colleagues that merely to exist—let alone create artistic works—we had to keep certain things from overwhelming our minds. However, I continued, in order to keep these things, such as the realities of an intestinal virus, from overwhelming our minds we attempted to deny them any voice whatever, neither a voice in our minds and certainly not a precise and clear voice in works of art. The voice of madness, for instance, is barely a whisper in the babbling history of art because its realities are themselves too maddening to speak of for very long… and those of the Teatro have no voice at all, given their imponderably grotesque nature.

Furthermore, I said, the Teatro not only propagated an intense awareness of

these things, these realities and functionings of realities, it was identical with them. And I, I boasted, had allowed my mind to be overwhelmed by all manner of Teatro stuff, while also managing to use this experience as material for my prose writings. "This," I practically shouted one day at Des Esseintes' Library, "is the superart." Then I promised that in two days time I would give a reading of my series of short prose pieces.

Nevertheless, as we sat around on some old furniture in a corner of Des Esseintes' Library, several of the others challenged my statements and assertions regarding the Teatro. One fellow writer, a poet, spoke hoarsely through a cloud of cigarette smoke, saying to me: "No one knows what this Teatro stuff is all about. I'm not sure I believe it myself." But I answered that Spence knew what it was all about, thinking that very soon I too would know what he knew. "Spencer said a woman in a tone of exaggerated disgust (she once lived with the photographer and was a photographer herself)- "He's not telling us about anything these days, never mind the Teatro." But I answered that, like the purple woman and the others, Spence had been overwhelmed by his encounter with the Teatro, and his artistic

impulse had been thereby utterly destroyed. “And your artistic impulse is still intact,” she said snidely. I answered that, yes, it was, and in two days I would prove it by reading a series of prose works that exhibited an intimacy with the most overwhelmingly grotesque experiences and gave voice to them. “That’s because you have no idea what you’re talking about,”

said someone else, and almost everyone supported this remark. I told them to be patient, wait and see what my prose writings revealed to them. “Reveal?” asked the poet. “Hell, no one even knows why it’s called the Teatro Grottesco.” I did not have an answer for that, but I repeated that they would understand much more about the Teatro in a few days, thinking to myself that within this period of time I would have either succeeded or failed in my attempt to provoke an encounter with the Teatro and the matter of my nonexistent antiTeatro prose writing would be immaterial.

On the very next day, however, I collapsed in Des Esseintes’ Library during a conversation with a different congregation of artists and highly artistic persons. Although the symptoms of my intestinal virus had never entirely disappeared I had not expected to collapse the way I did and ultimately to discover that what I thought was an intestinal virus was in fact something far more serious. As a

consequence of my collapse, my unconscious body ended up in the emergency room of a nearby hospital, the kind of place where borderline indigents like myself always end up—abackstreet hospital with dated fixtures and a staff of sleepwalkers.

When I next opened my eyes it was night. The bed in which they had put my body was beside a tall paned window that reflected the dim fluorescent light fixed to the wall above my bed, creating a black glare in the windowpanes that allowed no view of anything beyond them but only a broken image of myself and the room around me. There was a long row of these tall paned windows and several other beds in the ward, each of them supporting a sleeping body that, like mine, was damaged in some way and therefore had been committed to that backstreet hospital.

I felt none of the extraordinary pain that had caused me to collapse in Des Esseintes' Library. At that moment, in fact, I could feel nothing of the experiences of my past life: it seemed I had always been an occupant of that dark hospital ward and always would be. This sense of estrangement from both myself and everything else made it terribly difficult to remain in the hospital bed where I had been placed. At the same time I felt uneasy about any movement away from that bed, especially any movement that would cause me to approach the open doorway which led into a half-lighted backstreet hospital corridor.

Compromising between my impulse to get out of my bed and my fear of moving away from the bed and approaching that corridor, I positioned myself so that I was sitting on the edge of the mattress with my bare feet grazing the cold linoleum floor. I had been sitting on the edge of that mattress for quite awhile before I heard the voice out in the corridor.

The voice came over the public address system, but it was not a particularly loud voice. In fact I had to strain my attention for several minutes simply to discern the peculiar qualities of the voice and to decipher what it said. It sounded like a child's voice, a sing-songy voice full of taunts and mischief.

Over and over it repeated the same phrase–paging Dr. Groddeck, paging Dr.

Groddeck. The voice sounded incredibly hollow and distant, garbled by all kinds of interference. Paging Dr. Groddeck, it giggled from the other side of the world.

I stood up and slowly approached the doorway leading out into the corridor. But even after I had crossed the room in my bare feet and was standing in the open doorway, that child's voice did not become any 230

louder or any clearer. Even when I actually moved out into that long dim corridor with its dated lighting fixtures, the voice that was calling Dr.

Groddeck sounded just as hollow and distant. And now it was as if I were in a dream in which I was walking in my bare feet down a backstreet hospital corridor, hearing a crazy voice that seemed to be eluding me as I moved past the open doorways of innumerable wards full of damaged bodies. But

then the voice died away, calling to Dr. Groddeck one last time before fading like the final echo in a deep well. At the same moment that the voice ended its hollow outcrying, I paused somewhere toward the end of that shadowy corridor. In the absence of the mischievous voice I was able to hear something else, a sound like quiet, wheezing laughter. It was coming from the room just ahead of me along the right hand side of the corridor. As I approached this room I saw a metal plaque mounted at eye-level on the wall, and the words displayed on this plaque were these: Dr. T. Groddeck.

A strangely glowing light emanated from the room where I heard that quiet and continuous wheezing laughter. I peered around the edge of the doorway and saw that the laughter was coming from an old gentleman seated behind a desk, while the strangely glowing light was coming from a large globular object positioned on top of the desk directly in front of him. The light from this object—a globe of solid glass, it seemed—shone on the old gentleman's face, which was a crazy-looking face with a neatly clipped beard that was pure white and a pair of spectacles with slim rectangular lenses resting on the bridge of a slender nose.

When I stood in the doorway of that office, the eyes of Dr. Groddeck did not gaze up at me but continued to stare into the strange, shining globe and at the things that were inside it.

What were these things inside the globe that Dr. Groddeck was looking at? To me they appeared to be tiny star-shaped flowers evenly scattered throughout the glass, just the thing to lend a mock-artistic appearance to a common paperweight. Except that these flowers, these spidery chrysanthemums, were pure black. And they did not seem to be firmly fixed within the shining sphere, as one would expect, but looked as if they were floating in position, their starburst of petals wavering slightly like tentacles. Dr. Groddeck appeared to delight in the subtle movements of those black appendages. Behind rectangular spectacles his eyes rolled about as they tried to take in each of the hovering shapes inside the radiant globe on the desk before him.

Then the doctor slowly reached down into one of the deep pockets of the lab coat he was wearing, and his wheezing laughter grew more intense. From the open doorway I watched as he carefully removed a small paper bag from his pocket, but he never even glanced at me. With one hand he was now holding the crumpled bag directly over the globe. When he gave the bag a little shake, the things inside the globe responded with an increased agitation of their thin black arms. He used both hands to open the top of the bag and quickly turned it upside down.

From out of the bag something tumbled onto the globe, where it seemed to stick to the surface. It was not actually adhering to the surface of the globe, however, but was sinking into the interior of the glass. It squirmed as those soft black stars inside the globe gathered to pull it down to themselves. Before I could see what it was that they had captured and surrounded, the show was over. Afterward they returned to their places, floating slightly once again within the glowing sphere.

I looked at Dr. Groddeck and saw that he was finally looking back at me. He had stopped his asthmatic laughter, and his eyes were staring frigidly into mine, completely devoid of any readable meaning. Yet somehow these eyes provoked me.

Even as I stood in the open doorway of that hideous office in abackstreet hospital, Dr. Groddeck's eyes provoked in me an intense outrage, an astronomical resentment of the position I had been placed in. Even as I had consummated my plan to encounter the Teatro and experience its most devastating realities and functions (in order to turn my prose works into an antiTeatro phenomenon) I was outraged to be standing where I was standing and resentful of the staring eyes of Dr. Groddeck. No matter if I had approached the Teatro, the Teatro had approached me, or we both approached each other. I realized that there is such a thing as being approached in order to force one's hand into making what only appears to be an approach, which is actually a non-approach that negates the whole concept of approaching. It was all a fix from the start, because I belonged to an artistic underworld, because I was an artist whose work would be brought to an end by an encounter with the Teatro Grottesco. And so I was outraged by the eyes of Dr. Groddeck, which were the eyes of the Teatro,

and I was resentful of all insane realities and the excruciating functions of the Teatro. Although I knew that the persecutions of the Teatro were not 232

exclusively focused on the artists and highly artistic persons of the world, I was nevertheless outraged and resentful to be singled out for special treatment.

I wanted to punish those persons in this world who are not the object of such special treatment. Thus, at the top of my voice, I called out in the dim corridor, I cried out the summons for others to join me before the stage of the Teatro. Strange that I should think it necessary to compound the nightmare of all those damaged bodies in that backstreet hospital, as well as its staff of sleepwalkers who moved within a world of outdated fixtures. But by the time anyone arrived Dr. Groddeck was gone, and his office became nothing more than a room full of dirty laundry.

My escapade that night notwithstanding, I was soon released from the hospital pending the results of several tests I had been administered. I was feeling as well as ever, and the hospital, like any hospital, always needed the bedspace for more damaged bodies. They said I would be contacted in the next few days.

It was in fact the following day that I was informed of the outcome of my stay in the hospital. “Hello again,” began the letter, which was typed on aplain, though waterstained sheet of paper. “I was so pleased to finally meet you in person. I thought your performance in our interview at the hospital was really first rate, and I am authorized to offer you a position with us. There is an opening in our organization for someone with your resourcefulness and imagination. I’m afraid things didn’t work out with Mr. Spence. But he certainly did have a camera’s eye, and we have gotten some wonderful pictures from him. I would especially like to share with you his last shots of the soft black stars, or S.B.S., as we sometimes refer to them. Veritable superart, if there ever was such a thing!

“By the way, the results of your tests—some of which you have yet to be subjected to—are going to come back positive. If you think an intestinal virus is misery, just wait a few more months. So think fast, sir. We will

arrange another meeting with you in any case. And remember—you approached us. Or was it the other way around?

“As you might have noticed by now, all this artistic business can only keep you going so long before you’re left speechlessly gaping at the realities and functions of… well, I think you know what I’m trying to say. I was forced into this realization myself, and I’m quite mindful of what a blow this can be.

Indeed, it was I who invented the appellative for our organization as it is currently known. Not that I

put any stock in names, nor should you. Our company is so much older than its own name, or any other name for that matter. (And how many it’s had over the years—The Ten Thousand Things, Anima Mundi, Nethescurial.) You should be proud that we have a special part for you to play, such a talented artist. In time you will forget yourself entirely in your work, as we all do eventually. Myself, I go around with a trunkful of aliases, but do you think I can say who I once was really} A man of the theater, that seems plausible. Possibly I was the father of Faust or Hamlet … or merely Peter Pan.

“In closing, I do hope you will seriously consider our offer to join us. We can do something about your medical predicament. We can do just about anything.

Otherwise, I’m afraid that all I can do is welcome you to your own private hell, which will be as unspeakable as any on earth.”

The letter was signed Dr. Theodore Groddeck, and its prognostication of my physical health was accurate: I have taken more tests at the backstreet hospital and the results are somewhat grim. For several days and sleepless nights I have considered the alternatives the doctor proposed to me, as well as others of my own devising, and have yet to reach a decision on what course to follow. The one conclusion that keeps forcing itself upon me is that it makes no difference what choice I make, or do not make. You can

never anticipate the Teatro … or anything else. You can never know what you are approaching, or what is approaching you. Soon enough my thoughts will lose all clarity, and I will no longer be aware that there was ever a decision to be made. The soft black stars have already begun to fill the sky.

The Red Tower

The ruined factory stood three stories high in an otherwise featureless landscape. Although somewhat imposing on its own terms, it occupied only the most unobtrusive place within the gray emptiness of its surroundings, its presence serving as a mere accent upon a desolate horizon. No road led to the factory, nor were there any traces of one that might have led to it at some time in the distant past. If there had ever been such a road it would have been rendered useless as soon as it arrived at one of the four, red-bricked sides of the factory, even in the days when the facility was in full operation. The reason for this was simple: no doors had been built into the factory, no loading docks or entranceways allowed penetration of the outer walls of the structure, which was solid brick on all four sides without even a single window below the level of the second floor. The phenomenon of a large factory so closed off from the outside world was a point of extreme fascination to me. It was almost with regret that I ultimately learned about the factory's subterranean access. But of course that revelation in its turn also became a source for my truly degenerate sense of amazement, my decayed fascination.

The factory had long been in ruins, its innumerable bricks worn and crumbling, its many windows shattered. Each of the three enormous stories that stood above the ground level was vacant of all but dust and silence. The machinery, which densely occupied the three floors of the factory as well as considerable space beneath it, is said to have evaporated, I repeat, evaporated, soon after the factory ceased operation, leaving behind it only a few spectral outlines of deep vats and tanks, twisting tubes and funnels, harshly grinding gears and levers, giant belts and wheels that could be most clearly seen at twilight—and later, not at all. According to these strictly

hallucinatory accounts, the whole of the Red Tower, as the factory was known, had always been subject to fadings at certain times. This phenomenon, in the delirious or dying words of several witnesses, was due to a profound hostility between the clamorous and malodorous operations

of the factory and the desolate purity of the landscape surrounding it, the conflict occasionally resulting in temporary erasures, or fadings, of the former by the latter.

Despite their ostensibly mad or credulous origins, these testimonies, it seemed to me, deserved more than a cursory hearing. The legendary conflict between the factory and the grayish territory surrounding it may very well have been a fabrication of individuals who were lost in the advanced stages of either physical or psychic deterioration. Nonetheless, it was my theory, and remains so, that the Red Tower was not always that peculiar color for which it ultimately earned its fame. Thus the encrimsoning of the factory was a betrayal, a breaking-off, for it is my postulation that this ancient structure was in long-forgotten days the same pale hue as the world which encompassed it.

Furthermore, with an insight born of dispassion to the point of total despair, I envisioned that the Red Tower was never solely devoted to the lowly functions of an ordinary factory.

Beneath the three soaring stories of the Red Tower were two, possibly three, other levels. The one immediately below the first floor of the factory was the nexus of a unique distribution system for the goods which were manufactured on all three of the floors above. This first subterranean level in many ways resembled, and functioned in the manner of, an old-fashioned underground mine.

Elevator compartments enclosed by a heavy wire mesh, twisted and corroded, descended far below the surface into an expansive chamber which had been crudely dug out of the rocky earth and was haphazardly perpetuated by a dense structure of supports, a crisscrossing network of posts and pillars, beams and rafters, that included a variety of materials—wood, metal, concrete, bone, and a fine sinewy webbing that was fibrous and quite firm. From this central chamber radiated a system of tunnels that honeycombed the land beneath the gray and desolate country surrounding the Red Tower. Through these tunnels the goods manufactured by the factory could be carried, sometimes literally by hand, but more often by means of small wagons and carts, reaching near and far into the most obscure and unlikely delivery points.

The trade that was originally produced by the Red Tower was in some sense remarkable, but not, at first, of an extraordinary or especially ambitious nature. These were a gruesome array of goods, perhaps best described as novelty items. In the beginning there was a chaotic quality to the objects and constructions produced by the machinery at the Red Tower, a randomness that yielded formless things of no consistent shape or size or apparent design.

Occasionally there might appear a particular ashen lump that betrayed some semblance of a face or clawing fingers, or perhaps an assemblage that looked like a casket with tiny irregular wheels, but for the most part the early productions seemed relatively innocuous. After a time, however, things began to fall into place, as they always do, rejecting a harmless and uninteresting disorder—never an enduring state of affairs—and taking on the more usual plans and purposes of a viciously intent creation.

So it was that the Red Tower put into production its terrible and perplexing line of unique novelty items. Among the objects and constructions now manufactured were several of an almost innocent nature. These included tiny, delicate cameos that were heavier than their size would suggest, far heavier, and lockets whose shiny outer surface flipped open to reveal a black reverberant abyss inside, a deep blackness roaring with echoes. Along the same lines was a series of lifelike replicas of internal organs and physiological structures, many of them evidencing an advanced stage of disease and all of them displeasingly warm and soft to the touch. There was a fake disembodied hand on which fingernails would grow several inches overnight, every night like clockwork. Numerous natural objects, mostly bulbous gourds, were designed to produce a long deafening scream whenever they were picked up or otherwise disturbed in their vegetable stillness. Less scrutable were such things as hardened globs of lava which had set into their rough igneous forms a pair of rheumy eyes that perpetually shifted their gaze from side to side like a relentless pendulum. And there was also a humble piece of cement, a fragment broken away from any street or sidewalk, that left a most intractable stain, greasy and green, on whatever surface it was placed. But such fairly simple items were

eventually followed, and ultimately replaced, by more articulated objects and constructions. One example of this complex type of novelty item was an ornate music box that, when opened, emitted a brief gurgling or sucking sound in

emulation of a dying individual's death rattle. Another product manufactured in great quantity at the Red Tower was a pocket watch in a gold casing which opened to reveal a curious timepiece whose numerals were represented by tiny quivering insects while the circling "hands" were reptilian tongues, slender and pink. But these examples hardly begin to hint at the range of goods that came from the factory during its novelty phase of production. I should at least mention the exotic carpets woven with intricate abstract patterns that, when focused upon for a certain length of time, composed themselves into fleeting phantasmagoric scenes of the kind which might pass through a fever-stricken or even permanently damaged brain.

As it was revealed to me, and as I have already revealed to you, the means of distributing the novelty goods fabricated at the Red Tower was a system of tunnels located on the first level, not the second (or, possibly, third), that had been excavated below the three-story factory building itself. It seems that these subterranean levels were not necessarily part of the original plan of the factory but were in fact a perverse and unlikely development that might have occurred only as the structure known as the Red Tower underwent, over time, its own mutation from some prior state until it finally became a lowly site for manufacturing. This mutation would then have demanded the excavating—whether from above or below I cannot say—of a system of tunnels as a means for distributing the novelty goods which, for a time, it produced.

As the unique inventions of the Red Tower achieved their final forms, they seemed to have some peculiar location to which they were destined to be delivered, either by hand or by small wagons or carts pulled over sometimes great distances through the system of underground tunnels. Where they might ultimately pop up was anybody's guess. It might be in the back of a dark closet, buried under a pile of undistinguished junk, where some item of

the highest and most extreme novelty would lie for quite some time before it was encountered by sheer accident or misfortune. Conversely, the same invention, or an entirely different one, might be placed on the night-table beside someone's bed for near-immediate discovery. Any delivery point was possible, none was out of the reach of the Red Tower. There has even been testimony, either intensely hysterical or semi-conscious, of items from the factory being uncovered within the shelter of a living body, or one not long deceased. I know that such an 238

achievement was within the factory's powers, given its later production history.

But my own degenerate imagination is most fully captured by the thought of how many of those monstrous novelty goods produced at the Red Tower had been scrupulously and devoutly delivered—solely by way of those endless underground tunnels—to daringly remote places where they would never be found, nor ever could be.

Just as a system of distribution tunnels had been created by the factory when it developed into a manufacturer of novelty goods, their expansion was required as an entirely new phase of production gradually evolved. Inside the wire-mesh elevator compartment that provided access between the upper region of the factory and the underground tunnels, there was now a special lever installed which, when pulled back, or possibly pushed forward (I do not know such details), enabled one to descend to a second subterranean level. This latterly excavated area was much smaller, far more intimate, than the one directly above it, as could be observed the instant the elevator compartment came to a stop and a full view of things was attained. The scene which now confronted the uncertain minds of witnesses was, in many ways, like that of a secluded graveyard, surrounded by a rather crooked fence of widely spaced pickets held together by rusty wire. The headstones inside the fence all closely pressed against one another and were quite common, though somewhat antiquated, in their designs.

However, there were no names or dates inscribed on these monuments, nothing at all, in fact, with the exception of some rudimentary and abstract ornamentation.

This could be verified only when the subterranean graveyard was closely approached, for the lighting at this level was dim and unorthodox, provided exclusively by the glowing stone walls enclosing the area. These walls seemed to have been covered with phosphorescent paint which bathed the graveyard in a cloudy, grayish haze. For the longest time—how long I cannot say—my morbid reveries were focused on this murky vision of a graveyard beneath the factory, a subterranean graveyard surrounded by a crooked picket fence and suffused by the highly defective illumination given off by phosphorescent paint applied to stone walls. For the moment I must emphasize the vision itself, without any consideration paid to the utilitarian purposes of this place, that is, the function it served in relation to the factory above it.

The truth is that at some point all of the factory functions were 239

driven underground to this graveyard level. Long before the complete evaporation of machinery in the Red Tower, something happened to require the shut-down of all operations in the three floors of the factory which were above ground level.

The reasons for this action are deeply obscure, a matter of contemplation only when a state of hopeless and devouring curiosity has reached its height, when the burning light of speculation becomes so intense that it threatens to incinerate everything on which it shines. To my own mind it seems entirely valid to reiterate at this juncture the longstanding tensions that existed between the Red Tower, which I believe was not always stigmatized by such a hue and such a title, and the grayish landscape of utter desolation that surrounded this structure on all sides, looming around and above it for quite incalculable distances. But below the ground level of the factory was another matter: it was here that its operations at some point retreated; it was here, specifically at this graveyard level, that they continued.

Clearly the Red Tower had committed some violation or offense, its clamoring activities and unorthodox products—perhaps its very existence—constituting an affront to the changeless quietude of the world around it. In my personal judgement there had been a betrayal involved, a treacherous breaking of a bond.

I can certainly picture a time before the existence of the factory, before any of its features blemished the featureless country that extended so gray and so desolate on every side. Dreaming upon the grayish desolation of that landscape, I also find it quite easy to imagine that there might have occurred a lapse in the monumental tedium, a spontaneous and inexplicable impulse to deviate from a dreary perfection, perhaps even an unconquerable desire to risk a move toward a tempting defectiveness. As a concession to this impulse or desire out of nowhere, as a minimal surrender, a creation took place and a structure took form where there had been nothing of its kind before. I picture it, at its inception, as a barely discernable irruption in the landscape, a mere sketch of an edifice, possibly translucent when making its first appearance, a gray density rising in the grayness, embossed upon it in a most tasteful and harmonious design. But such structures or ereations have their own desires, their own destinies to fulfil, their own mysteries and mechanisms which they must follow at whatever risk.

From a gray and desolate and utterly featureless landscape a dull edifice had been produced, a pale, possibly translucent tower which, 240

over time, began to develop into a factory, began to produce, as if in the spirit of the most grotesque belligerence, a line of quite morbid, quite wonderfully disgusting novelty goods. In an expression of defiance, at some point, it reddened with an enigmatic passion for betrayal and perversity. On the surface the Red Tower might have seemed a splendid complement to the grayish desolation of its surroundings, a unique, picturesque composition that served to define the glorious essence of each of them. But in fact there existed between them a profound and ineffable hostility. An attempt was made to reclaim the Red Tower, or at least to draw it back toward the formless origins of its being. I am referring, of course, to that show of force which resulted in the evaporation of the factory's dense arsenal of machinery. Each of the three stories of the Red Tower had been cleaned out, purged of its offending means of manufacturing novelty items, and the part of the factory that rose above the ground was left to fall into ruins.

Had the machinery in the Red Tower not been evaporated, I believe that the subterranean graveyard, or something very much like it, would nonetheless have come into existence at some point or another. This was the direction in

which the factory had been moving, as was suggested by some of its later models of novelty items. Machines were becoming obsolete as the diseased mania of the Red Tower intensified and evolved into more experimental, even visionary projects. I have previously reported that the headstones in the factory's subterranean graveyard were absent of any names of the interred, or dates of birth and death.

This fact is also confirmed by numerous accounts rendered in borderline-hysterical gibberish. The reason for these blank headstones is entirely evident as one gazes upon them standing crooked and closely packed together in the phosphorescent haze given off by the stone walls covered with luminous paint. None of these graves, in point of fact, could be said to have anyone buried in them whose names and dates of birth and death would require inscription on the headstones. These were not what might be called burying graves. This is to say that these were in no sense graves for burying the dead, quite the contrary: these were graves of a highly experimental design from which the newest productions of the Red Tower were to be born.

From its beginnings as a manufacturer of novelty items of an extravagant nature, the factory had now gone into the business of 241

creating what came to be known as "hyperorganisms." These new productions were also of a fundamentally extreme nature, representing an even greater divergence on the part of the Red Tower from the bland and gray desolation in the midst of which it stood. As implied by their designation as hyperorganisms, this line of goods displayed the most essential qualities of their organic nature, which meant, of course, that they were wildly conflicted in their two basic features.

On the one hand, they manifested an intense vitality in all aspects of their form and function; on the other hand, and simultaneously, they manifested an ineluctable element of decay in these same areas. That is to say that each of these hyperorganisms, even as they scintillated with an obscene degree of vital impulses, also, and at the same time, had degeneracy and death written deeply upon them. In accord with a tradition of mute or raving madness, it seems the less said about these offspring of the birthing graves, or any similar creations, the better. I myself have been almost entirely restricted to

a state of seething speculation concerning the luscious particularities of all hyper-organic phenomena produced in the subterranean graveyard of the Red Tower.

Although we may reasonably assume that such creations were not to be called beautiful, we cannot know for ourselves the mysteries and mechanisms of, for instance, how these creations moved throughout the hazy luminescence of that underground world; what creaky or spasmic gestures they might have been capable of executing, if any; what sounds they might have made or the specific organs used for making them; how they might have appeared when awkwardly emerging from deep shadows or squatting against those nameless headstones; what trembling stages of mutation they almost certainly would have undergone following the generation of their larvae upon the barren earth of the graveyard; what their bodies might have produced or emitted in the way of fluids and secretions; how they might have responded to the mutilation of their forms for reasons of an experimental or entirely savage nature. Often I picture to myself what frantically clawing efforts these creations probably made to deliver themselves from that confining environment which their malformed or nonexistent brains could not begin to understand. They could not have comprehended, any more than can I, for what purpose they were bred from those graves, those incubators of hyperorganisms, minute factories of flesh that existed wholly within and far below the greater factory of the Red Tower.

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It was no surprise, of course, that the production of hyperorganisms was not allowed to continue for very long before a second wave of destruction was visited upon the factory. This time it was not merely the fading, and ultimate evaporation of machinery, that took place; this time it was something far more brutal. Once again forces of ruination were directed at the factory, specifically the subterranean graveyard located at its second underground level, its three-story structure that stood above ground having already been rendered an echoing ruin. Information on what remained of the graveyard, and of its cleverly blasphemous works, is available to my own awareness only in the form of shuddering and badly garbled whispers

of mayhem and devastation and wholesale sundering of most unspeakable sort. These same sources also seem to regard this incident as the culmination, if not the conclusion, of the longstanding hostilities between the Red Tower and that grayish halo of desolation that hovered around on all sides, the very landscape of the ill-destined factory itself. Such a shattering episode would appear to have terminated the career of the Red Tower.

Nevertheless, there are indications that, appearances to the contrary, the factory continues to be active despite its status as a silent ruin. After all, the evaporation of the machinery which turned out countless novelty items in the three-story red-brick factory proper, and the ensuing obsolescence of its sophisticated system of tunnels at the first underground level, did not prevent the factory from pursuing its business by other and more devious means. The work at the second underground level (the graveyard level), went very well for a time. Following the vicious decimation of those ingenious and fertile graves, along with the merchandise they produced, it may have seemed that the manufacturing history of the Red Tower had been brought to a close. Yet there are indications that below the three-story above-ground factory, below the first and the second underground levels, there exists a third level of subterranean activity. Perhaps it is only a desire for symmetry, a hunger for compositional balance in things, that has led to a series of the most vaporous rumors of this third underground level in order to provide a kind of complementary proportion to the three stories of the factory that rise into the gray and featureless landscape above ground. At this third level, these misty rumors maintain, the factory's schedule of production is being carried out in some new and strange manner, representing its

most ambitious venture in the output of putrid creations, ultimately consummating its tradition of degeneracy, reaching toward a perfection of defect and disorder, according to every polluted and foggy rumor concerned with this issue.

Perhaps it seems that I have said too much about the Red Tower, and perhaps it has sounded far too strange. Do not think that I am unaware of

such things. But as I have noted throughout this document, I am only repeating what I have heard.

I myself have never seen the Red Tower—no one ever has, and possibly no one ever will. And yet wherever I go people are talking about it. In one way or another they are talking about the nightmarish novelty items or about the mysterious and revolting hyperorganisms, as well as babbling endlessly about the subterranean system of tunnels and the secluded graveyard whose headstones display no names and no dates designating either birth or death. Everything they are saying is about the Red Tower, in one way or another, and about nothing else but the Red Tower. We are all talking and thinking about the Red Tower in our own degenerate way. I have only recorded what everyone is saying (though they may not know they are saying it), and sometimes what they have seen (though they may not know they have seen it). But still they are always talking, in one deranged way or another, about the Red Tower. I hear them talk of it every day of my life. Unless of course they begin to speak about gray and desolate landscape, that hazy void in which the Red Tower—the great and industrious Red Tower—is so precariously nestled. Then the voices grow quiet until I can barely hear them as they attempt to communicate with me in choking scraps of postnightmare trauma. Now is just such a time when I must strain to hear the voices. I wait for them to reveal to me the new ventures of the Red Tower as it proceeds into even more corrupt phases of production, including the shadowy workshop of its third subterranean level. I must keep still and listen for them; I must keep quiet for a terrifying moment. Then I will hear the sounds of the factory starting up its operations once more. Then I will be able to speak again of the Red Tower.

Purity

We were living in a rented house, neither the first nor the last of a long succession of such places that the family inhabited throughout my childhood years. It was shortly after we had moved into that particular house that my father preached to us his philosophy of "rented living." He explained that it was not possible to live in any other way and that attempting to do so was the worst form of delusion. "We must actively embrace the reality of non-ownership"

he told my mother, my sister, and me, towering over us and gesturing with his heavy arms as we sat together on a rented sofa in our rented house. "Nothing belongs to us. Everything is something that is rented out. Our very heads are filled with rented ideas passed on from one generation to the next. Wherever your thoughts finally settle is the same place that the thoughts of countless other persons have settled and have left their impression, just as the backsides of other persons have left their impression on that sofa where you are now sitting. We live in a world where every surface, every opinion or passion, everything altogether is tainted by the bodies and minds of strangers.

Cooties—intellectual cooties and physical cooties from other people— are crawling all around us and all over us at all times. There is no escaping this fact."

Nevertheless, it was precisely this fact that my father seemed most intent on escaping during the time we spent in that house. It was an especially cootie-ridden residence in a bad neighborhood that bordered on an even worse neighborhood. The place was also slightly haunted, which was more or less the norm for the habitations my father chose to rent. Several times a year, in fact, we packed up at one place and settled into another, always keeping a considerable distance between our locations, or relocations. And every time we entered one

of our newly rented houses for the first time, my father would declaim that this was a place where he could "really get something accomplished." Soon afterward, he would begin spending more and more time in the basement of the house, sometimes living down there for weeks on end. The rest of us were banned from any intrusion on my father's lower territories unless we had been explicitly invited to participate in some project of his. Most of the time I was the only available subject, since my mother and sister were often away on one of their "trips," the nature of which I was never informed of and seldom heard anything about upon their return. My father referred to these absences on the part of my mother and sister as "unknown sabbaticals" by way of disguising his ignorance or complete lack of interest in their jaunts. None of this is to protest that I minded being left so much to myself. (Least of all did I miss my mother and her European cigarettes fouling the atmosphere around the house.) Like the rest of the family, I was adept at finding ways to occupy myself in some wholly passionate direction, never mind whether or not my passion was a rented one.

One evening in late autumn I was upstairs in my bedroom preparing myself for just such an escapade when the doorbell rang. This was, to say the least, an uncommon event for our household. At the time, my mother and sister were away on one of their sabbaticals, and my father had not emerged from his basement for many days. Thus, it seemed up to me to answer the startling sound of the doorbell, which I had not heard since we had moved into the house and could not remember hearing in any of the other rented houses in which I spent my childhood. (For some reason I had always believed that my father disconnected all the doorbells as soon as we relocated to a newly rented house.) I moved hesitantly, hoping the intruder or intruders would be gone by the time I arrived at the door. The doorbell rang again. Fortunately, and incredibly, my father had come up from the basement. I was standing in the shadows at the top of the stairs when I saw his massive form moving across the living room, stripping himself of a dirty lab coat and throwing it into a corner before he reached the front door. Naturally I thought that my father was expecting this visitor, who perhaps had something to do with his work in the basement. However, this was not obviously the case, at least as far as I could tell from my eavesdropping at the top of the stairs.

By the sound of his voice, the visitor was a young man. My father invited him into the house, speaking in a straightforward and amiable fashion that I knew was entirely forced. I wondered how long he would be able to maintain this uncharacteristic tone in conversation, for he bid the young man to have a seat in the living room where the two of them could talk "at leisure," a locution that sounded absolutely bizarre as spoken by my father.

"As I said at the door, sir," the young man said, "I'm going around the neighborhood telling people about a very worthy organization."

"Citizens for Faith," my father cut in.

"You've heard of our group?"

"Not actually, I'm afraid. But I think I comprehend your general principles."

"Then perhaps you might be interested in making a donation," said the young man prematurely.

"I would indeed."

"That's wonderful, sir."

"But only on the condition that your principles might be construed, advanced, and propagated as exactly the opposite of what they are."

So ended my father's short-lived capitulation to straightforwardness and amiability.

"Sir?" said the young man, his brow creasing a bit with incomprehension.

"I will explain. You have these two principles in your head, and possibly they are the only principles that are holding your head together. The first is the principle of nations, countries, the whole hullabaloo of mother lands and father lands. The second is the principle of deities. Neither of these principles has anything real about them. They are merely impurities

poisoning your head. In a single phrase— Citizens for Faith—you have incorporated two of the three major principles–or impurities—that must be eliminated, completely eradicated, before our species can begin an approach to a pure conception of existence.

Without pure conception, or something approaching pure conception, everything is a disaster and will continue to be a disaster."

"I understand if you're not interested in making a donation, sir," said the young man, at which point my father dug his hand into the right pocket of his trousers and pulled out a wad of cash that was rolled 247

into a tube and secured with a thick rubber band. He held it up before the young man's eyes.

"This is for you, but only if you can take those heinous principles of yours and clean them out of your head."

"I don't believe my faith to be something that's just in my head."

To this point, I thought that my father was taunting the young man for pure diversion, perhaps as a means of distracting himself from the labors in which he had been engaged so intensely over the past few days. Then I heard what to my ears was an ominous shift in my father's words, signifying his movement from the old-school iconoclast he had been playing to something desperate and unprincipled with respect to the young man.

"Please forgive me. I didn't mean to suggest that anything like that was only in your head. How could such a thing be true when I know quite well that something of the kind inhabits this very house?"

"He is in every house," said the young man. "He is in all places."

"Indeed, indeed. But something like that is very much in this particular house."

My suspicion was now that my father made reference to the haunted condition, although barely so, of our rented house. I myself had already assisted him in a small project relevant to this condition and what its actual meaning might be, at least insofar as my father chose to explain such things. He even allowed me to keep a momento of this "phase-one experiment," as he called it. I was all but sure that this was the case when my father alluded to his basement.

"Basement?" said the young man.

"Yes," said my father. "I could show you."

"Not in my head but in your basement," said the young man as he attempted to clarify what my father was claiming.

"Yes, yes. Let me showyou. And afterward I will make a generous donation to your group. What do you say?"

The young man did not immediately say anything, and perhaps this was the reason that my father quickly shouted out my name. I backed up a few steps and waited, then descended the stairway as if I had not been eavesdropping all along.

"This is my son," my father said to the young man, who stood up to shake my hand. He was thin and wore a secondhand suit, just as I imagined him while I was eavesdropping at the top of the stairs. "Daniel, this gentleman and I have some business to conduct. I want

you to see that we're not disturbed." I simply stood there as if I had every intention of obediently following these instructions. My father then turned to the young man, indicating the way to the basement. "We won't be long."

No doubt my presence—that is, the normality of my presence— was a factor in the young man's decision to go into the basement. My father would have known that. He would not know, nor would he have cared, that I quietly left the house as soon as he closed the basement door behind him

and his guest. I did consider lingering for a time at the house, if only to gain some idea of what phase my father's experimentation had now entered, given that I was a participant in its early stages. However, that night I was eager to see a friend of mine who lived in the neighborhood.

To be precise, my friend did not live in the bad neighborhood where my family had rented a house but in the worse neighborhood nearby. It was only a few streets away, but this was the difference between a neighborhood where some of the houses had bars across their doors and windows and one in which there was nothing left to protect or to save or to care about in any way. It was another world altogether … a twisted paradise of danger and derangement… of crumbling houses packed extremely close together… of burned-out houses leaning toward utter extinction … of houses with black openings where once there had been doors and windows … and of empty fields over which shone a moon that was somehow different from the one seen elsewhere on this earth.

Sometimes there would be an isolated house hanging onto the edge of an open field of shadows and shattered glass. And the house would be so contorted by ruin that the possibility of its being inhabited sent the imagination swirling into a pit of black mysteries. Upon closer approach, one might observe thin, tattered bed sheets in place of curtains. Finally, after prolonged contemplation, the miracle would be revealed of a soft and wavering glow inside the house. Then one of the bed sheets moved slightly, and the voice of a woman called out to me as I stood teetering on the broken remnants of a sidewalk.

"Hey, you. Hey, boy. You got any money on you?"

"Some," I replied to that powerful voice.

"Then would you do something for me?"

"What?" I asked.

“Would you go up to the store and get me some salami sticks? The long ones, not those little ones. I’ll pay you when you come back.”

When I returned from the store, the woman again called out to me through the glowing bed sheets. “Step careful on those porch stairs,” she said. “The door’s open.”

The only light inside the house emanated from a small television on a metal stand. The television faced a sofa that seemed to be occupied from end to end by a black woman of indefinite age. In her left hand was a jar of mayonnaise, and in her right hand was an uncooked hot dog, the last one from an empty package lying on the bare floor of the house. She submerged the hot dog into the mayonnaise, then pulled it out and finished it off without taking her eyes from the television. After licking away some mayonnaise from her fingers, she screwed the lid back on the jar and set it to one side on the sofa, which appeared to be the only piece of furniture in the room. I held out the salami sticks to her, and she put some money in my hand. It was the exact amount I had paid, plus one dollar.

I could hardly believe that I was actually standing inside one of the houses I had been admiring since my family moved into the neighborhood. It was a cold night, and the house was unheated. The television must have operated on batteries, because it had no electrical cord trailing behind it. I felt as if I had crossed a great barrier to enter an outpost that had been long abandoned by the world, a place cut off from reality itself. I wanted to ask the woman if I might be allowed to curl up in some corner of that house and never again leave it. Instead, I asked if I could use the bathroom.

She stared at me silently for a moment and then reached down behind the cushions of the sofa. What she brought forth was a flashlight. She handed it to me and said, “Use this and watch yourself. It’s the second door down that hall. Not the first door—the second door. And don’t fall in.”

As I walked down the hall I kept the flashlight focused on the gouged and filthy wooden floor just a few feet ahead of me. I opened the second door, not the first, then closed it behind me. The room in which I found myself was not a toilet but a large closet. Toward the back of the closet there was a hole in the floor. I shined the flashlight into the hole and saw that it led

straight into the basement of the house. Down there were the pieces of a porcelain sink and commode, which must have fallen through the floor of the bathroom that was 250

once behind the first door I had passed in the hallway. Because it was a cold night, and the house was unheated, the smell was not terribly strong. I knelt at the edge of the hole and shined the flashlight into it as far as its thin beam would reach. But the only other objects I could see were some broken bottles stuck within the strata of human waste. I thought about what other things might be in that basement… and I became lost in those thoughts.

"Hey, boy," I heard the woman call out. "Are you all right?"

When I returned to the front of the house, I saw that the woman had other visitors. When they held up their hands in front of their faces, I realized that I still had the shining flashlight in my hand. I switched it off and handed it back to the woman on the sofa.

"Thank you," I said as I maneuvered my way past the others and toward the front door. Before leaving I turned to the woman and asked if I might come back to the house.

"If you like," she said. "Just make sure you bring me some of those salami sticks."

That was how I came to know my friend Candy, whose house I visited many times since our first meeting on that fortuitous night. On some visits, which were not always at night, she would be occupied with her business, and I would keep out of her way as a steady succession of people young and old, black and white, came and went. Other times, when Candy was not so busy, I squeezed next to her on the sofa, and we watched television together. Occasionally we talked, although our conversations were usually fairly brief and superficial, stalling out as soon as we arrived at some chasm that divided our respective lives and could not be bridged by either of us. When I told her about my mother's putrid European cigarettes, for instance, Candy had a difficult time with idea of "European," or perhaps with the very word itself. Similarly, I would often be unable to supply a context from my own life that would allow me to comprehend something that Candy

would casually interject as we sat watching television together. I had been visiting her house for at least a month when, out of nowhere, Candy said to me, “You know, I had a little boy that was just about your age.”

“What happened to him?” I asked.

“Oh, he got killed,” she said, as if such an answer explained itself and warranted no further elaboration. I never urged Candy to expand 251

upon this subject, but neither could I forget her words or the resigned and distant voice in which she spoke them.

Later I found out that quite a few children had been killed in Candy’s neighborhood, some of whom appeared to have been the victims of a child-murderer who had been active throughout the worst neighborhoods of the city for a number of years before my family moved there. (It was, in fact, my mother who, with outrageous insincerity, warned me about “some dangerous pervert” stealthily engaged in cutting kids’ throats right and left in what she called “that terrible neighborhood where your friend lives.”) On the night that I left our rented house after my father had gone into the basement with the young man who was wearing a secondhand suit, I thought about this child-murderer as I walked the streets leading to Candy’s house. These streets gained a more intense hold upon me after I learned about the child killings, like a nightmare that exercises a hypnotic power forcing your mind to review its images and events over and over no matter how much you want to forget them. While I was not interested in actually falling victim to a child-murderer, the threat of such a thing happening to me only deepened my fascination with those crowded houses and the narrow spaces between them, casting another shadow over the ones in which that neighborhood was already enveloped.

As I walked toward Candy’s house, I kept one of my hands in the pocket of my coat where I carried something that my father had constructed to be used in the event that, to paraphrase my irrepressibly inventive parent, anyone ever tried to inflict personal harm upon me. My sister was given an identical gadget, which looked something like a fountain pen. (Father told us not to say anything about these devices to anyone, including my mother, who for her part had long ago equipped herself with self-protection in the

form of a small-caliber automatic pistol.) On several occasions I had been tempted to show this instrument to Candy, but ultimately I did not break my vow of secrecy on which my father had insisted. Nevertheless, there was something else my father had given me, which I carried in a small paper bag swinging at my side, that I was excited to show Candy that night. No restrictions had been placed on disclosing this to anyone, although it probably never occurred to my father that I would ever desire to do so.

What I carried with me, contained in a squat little jar inside the 252

paper bag, was a by-product, so to speak, of the first-phase experiment in which I had assisted my father not long after we moved into our rented house. I have already mentioned that, like so many of the houses where my family lived during my childhood years, our current residence was imbued with a certain haunted aspect, however mild it may have been in this instance. Specifically, this haunting was manifested in a definite presence I sensed in the attic of the house, where I spent a great deal of time before I became a regular visitant at Candy's. As such things go, in my experience, there was nothing especially noteworthy about this presence. It seemed to be concentrated near the wooden beams which crossed the length of the attic and from which, I imagined, some former inhabitant of the house may once have committed suicide by hanging. Such speculation, however, was of no interest to my father, who strongly objected to the possibility of spooks or spirits of any kind or even the use of these terms.

"There is nothing in the attic," he explained to me. "It's only the way that your head is interacting with the space of that attic. There are certain fields of forces that are everywhere. And these forces, for reasons unknown to me as yet, are potentiated in some places more than others. Do you understand? The attic is not haunting your head—your head is haunting the attic. Some heads are more haunted than others, whether they are haunted by ghosts or by gods or by creatures from outer space. These are not real things. Nonetheless, they are indicative of real forces, animating and even creative forces, which your head only conceives to be some kind of spook or who knows what. You are going to help me prove this by allowing me to use my apparatus in the basement to siphon from your head that thing which you believe is haunting the attic. This siphoning will take place in a very tiny

part of your head, because if I siphoned your whole head … well, never mind about that. Believe me, you won't feel a thing."

After it was over, I no longer sensed the presence in the attic. My father has siphoned it away and contained it in a small jar, which he gave to me once he was through with it as an object of research, his first-phase of experimentation in a field that, unknown to other scientists who have since performed similar work, my father was the true Copernicus or Galileo or whomever one might care to name. However, as may be obvious by now, I did not share my father's scientific temperament. And although I no longer felt the presence in the attic, I was entirely resistant to abandoning the image of someone 253

hanging himself from the wooden beams crossing the length of a lonely attic and leaving behind him an unseen guideline to another world. Therefore, I was delighted to find that the sense of this presence was restored to me in the portable form of a small jar, which, when I cupped it tightly in my hands, conveyed into my system an even more potent sense of the supernatural than I had previously experienced in the attic. This was what I was bringing to Candy on that night in late autumn.

When I entered Candy's house, there was no business going on that might distract from what I had to show her. There were in fact two figures slumped against the wall on the opposite side of the front room of the house, but they seemed inattentive, if not completely oblivious, to what was happening around them.

"What did you bring for Candy?" she said, looking at the paper bag I held in my hand. I sat down on the sofa beside her, and she leaned close to me.

"This is something…," I started to say as I removed the jar from the bag, holding it by its lid. Then I realized that I had no way to communicate to her what it was I had brought. It was not my intention to distress her in anyway, but there was nothing I could say to prepare her. "Now don't open it," I said.

"Just hold it."

“It looks like jelly,” she said as I placed the jar in her meaty hands.

Fortunately, the contents of the jar presented no disturbing images, and in the glowing light of the television they took on a rather soothing appearance. She gently closed her grip on the little glass container as if she were aware of the precious nature of what was inside. She seemed completely unafraid, even relaxed. I had no idea what her reaction would be. I knew only that I wanted to share with her something that she could not otherwise have known in this life, just as she had shared the wonders of her house with me.

“Oh, my God,” she softly exclaimed. “I knew it. I knew that he wasn’t gone from me. I knew that I wasn’t alone.”

Afterward, it occurred to me that what I had witnessed was in accord with my father’s assertions. Just as my head had been haunting the attic with the presence of someone who had hanged himself, Candy’s head was now haunting the jar with a presence of her own design, one which was wholly unlike my own. It seemed that she wished to hold on to that jar forever. Typically, forever was about to end. A nondescript car had just pulled up and stopped in front of 254

Candy’s house. The driver quickly exited the vehicle and slammed its door behind him.

“Candy,” I said, “There’s some business coming.”

I had to tug at the jar to free it from her grasp, but she finally let it go and turned toward the door. As usual, I wandered off to one of the back rooms of the house, an empty bedroom where I liked to huddle in a corner and think about all the sleeping bodies that had dreamed there throughout innumberable nights. But on this occasion I did not huddle in a corner. Instead, I kept watch on what was happening in the front room of the house. The car outside had come to a stop too aggressively, too conspicuously, and the man in the long coat who walked toward the house moved in a way that was also too aggressive, too conspicuous. He pushed open the door of Candy’s house and left it open after he stepped inside.

“Where’s the white kid?” said the man in the long coat.

“No white people in here,” said Candy, who held her eyes on the television. “Not including you.”

The man walked over to the two figures across the room and gave each of them a nudge with his foot.

“If you didn’t know, I’m the one who lets you do business.”

“I know who you are, Mr. Police Detective. You’re the one who took my boy. You took other ones too, I know that.”

“Shut up, fat lady. I’m here for the white kid.”

I took the pen out of my pocket and pulled off the top, revealing a short, thick needle like the point of a pushpin. Holding the pen at my side and out of sight, I walked back down the hallway.

“What do you want?” I said to the man in the long coat.

“I’m here to take you home, kid.”

If there was anything I had ever known in my life as a cold, abstract certainty, it was this: if I went with this man, I would not be going home.

“Catch,” I said as I threw the little jar at him.

He caught the jar with both hands, and for a moment his face flashed a smile. I have never seen a smile die so quickly or so completely. If I had blinked, I would have missed the miraculous transition. The jar then seemed to jump out of his hands and onto the floor. Recovering himself, he took a step forward and grabbed me. I have no reason to think that Candy or the others in the room saw me jab the pen into his leg. What they saw was the man in the long coat 255

releasing me and then crumbling into a motionless pile. Evidently the effect was immediate. One of the two figures stepped out of the shadows and gave

the fallen man the same kind of contemptuous nudge that had been given to him.

“He’s dead, Candy,” said the one figure.

“You sure?”

The other figure rose to his feet and mule-kicked the head of the man on the floor. “Seems so,” he said.

“I’ll be damned,” said Candy, looking my way. “He’s all yours. I don’t want no part of him.”

I found the jar, which fortunately was unbroken, and went to sit on the sofa next to Candy. In a matter of minutes, the two figures had stripped the other man down to his boxer shorts. Then one of them pulled off the boxer shorts, saying, “They look practically new.” However, he stopped pulling soon enough when he saw what was under them. We all saw what was there, no doubt about that.

But I wondered if the others were as confused by it as I was. I had always thought about such things in an ideal sense, a mythic conception handed down over the centuries. But it was nothing like that.

“Put him in the hole!” shouted Candy, who had stood up from the sofa and was pointing toward the hallway. “Put him in the goddamn hole!”

They dragged the body into the closet and dropped it into the basement. There was a slapping sound made by the unclothed form as it hit the floor down there.

When the two figures came out of the closet, Candy said, “Now get rid of the rest of this stuff and get rid of the car and get rid of yourselves.”

Before exiting the house, one of the figures turned back. “There’s a big hunk of cash here, Candy. You’re going to need some traveling money. You can’t stay here.”

To my relief, Candy took part of the money. I got up from the sofa and set the jar on the cushion beside my friend.

“Where will you go?” I asked.

“There are plenty of places like this one in the city. No heat, no electricity, no plumbing. And no rent. I’ll be all right.

“I won’t say anything.”

“I know you won’t. Good-bye, boy.”

I said good-bye and wandered slowly home, dreaming all the while about what was now in Candy’s basement.

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By the time I arrived at the house it was after midnight. My mother and sister must have also returned because I could smell the stench from my mother’s European cigarettes as soon as I took two steps inside. My father was lying on the living room sofa, clearly exhausted after so many days of working in the basement. He also seemed quite agitated, his eyes wide open and staring upwards, his head moving back and forth in disgust or negation or both, and his voice repeatedly chanting, “Hopeless impurities, hopeless impurities.” Hearing these words helped to release my thoughts from what I had seen at Candy’s. They also reminded me that I wanted to ask my father about something he had said to the young man in the secondhand suit who had visited the house earlier that night.

But my father’s condition at the moment did not appear to lend itself to such talk. In fact, he betrayed no awareness whatever of my presence. Since I did not yet feel up to confronting my mother and sister, who I could now hear were moving about upstairs (probably still unpacking from their trip), I decided to take this opportunity to violate my father’s sanctions against entering the basement without his explicit authorization. This, I believed, would provide me with something to take my mind off the recent events of that night.

However, as I descended the stairs into my father's basement, I felt my mind and senses being pulled back into the dark region of Candy's basement. Even before I reached the bottom of the stairs, that underground place imposed upon me its atmosphere of ruin and wreckage and of an abysmal chaos that, I was thankful to discover, I still found captivating. And when I saw the state of things down there, I was overcome with a thrilling awe that I had never experienced before.

Everything around me was in pieces. It looked as if my father had taken an ax and hacked up the whole apparatus on which he had once placed all his hopes of accomplishing some task that only he cared to envision. Wires and cords hung from the ceiling, all of them chopped through and dangling like vines in a jungle. A greasy, greenish liquid was running across the floor and sluicing into the basement drain. I waded through an undergrowth of broken glass and torn papers. I reached down and picked up some of the pages savagely ripped from my father's voluminous notebooks. Meticulous diagrams and graphs were obscured by words and phrases written with a thick, black marker. Page after page had the word "IMPURE" scrawled over them

like graffiti on the walls of a public toilet. Other recurring exclamations were: "NOTHING BUT IMPURITIES," "IMPURE HEADS," "NOTHING REVEALED," "NO PURE

CONCEPTION," "IMPOSSIBLE IMPURITIES," and, finally, "THE FORCES OF AN IMPURE

UNIVERSE."

At the far end of the basement I saw a hybrid contraption that looked as if it were a cross between a monarch's throne and an electric chair. Bound to this device by straps confining his arms and legs and head was the young man in a secondhand suit. His eyes were open, but they had no focus in them. I noticed that the greasy, greenish liquid had its source in a container the size of a water-cooler bottle that was upended next to the big chair. There was a label on the container, written on masking tape, that read:

“siphonage.” Whatever spooks or spirits or other entities that had inhabited the young man’s head—and my father appeared to have drained off a sizeable quantity of this stuff—were now making their way into the sewer system. They must have lost something, perhaps grown stale, once released from their container, because I felt no aura of the spectral— either malignant or benign—emanating from this residual substance.

I was unable to tell if the young man was still alive in any conventional sense of the word. He may have been. In any case, his condition was such that my family would once again need to find another house in which to live.

“What happened down here?” said my sister from the other side of the basement.

She was sitting on the stairs. “Looks like another one of Dad’s projects took a bad turn.”

“That’s the way it looks,” I said, walking back toward the stairs.

“Do you think that guy was carrying much money on him?”

“I don’t know. Probably. He was here collecting for some kind of organization.”

“Good, because Mom and I came back broke. And it’s not as if we spent all that much.”

“Where did you go?” I said, taking a seat beside my sister.

“You know I can’t talk about that.”

“I had to ask.”

After a pause, my sister whispered, “Daniel, do you know what a hermaphrodite is?”

I tried my best to conceal any reaction to my sister’s question, even though it had caused a cyclone of images and emotions to arise 258

within me. That was what had confused me about the police detective's body. In my imagination, I had always pictured a neat separation of parts. But it was nothing like that, as I have already pointed out. Everything was all mixed together. Thank you, Elisa. Despite her adherence to my mother's strict rule of silence, my sister always managed to give away something of what they had been up to.

"Why do ask that?" I said, also whispering. "Did you meet someone like that when you were with Mom?"

"Absolutely not," she said.

"You have to tell me, Elisa. Did Mom … did she talk about me … did she talk about me to this person?"

"I wouldn't know. I really wouldn't," said Elisa as she rose to her feet and walked back upstairs. When she reached the top step, she turned around and said, "How's this thing between you and Mom going to end? Every time I mention your name, she just clams up. It doesn't make any sense."

"The forces of an impure universe," I said rhetorically.

"What?" said my sister.

"Nothing that drives anybody makes any sense, if you haven't noticed that by now. It's just our heads, like Dad's always saying."

"Whatever that means. Anyway, you better keep your mouth shut about what I said.

I'm never telling you anything ever again," she finished and then went upstairs.

I followed my sister into the living room. My father was now sitting up on the sofa next to my mother, who was opening boxes and pulling things out of bags, presumably showing what she had bought on her latest trip with Elisa. I sat down in a chair across from them.

"Hi, baby," said my mother.

“Hi, Mom,” I said, then turned to my father. “Hey, Dad, can I ask you something?” He still seemed a bit delirious. “Dad?”

“Your father’s very tired, honey.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I just want to ask him one thing. Dad, when you were talking to that guy, you said something about three … you called them principles.”

“Countries, deities,” said my father from a deep well of depression. “Obstacles to pure conception.”

“Yeah, but what was the third principle. You never said anything about that.”

But my father had faded out and was now gazing disconsolately at 259

the floor. My mother, however, was smiling. No doubt she had heard all of my father’s talk many times over.

“The third principle?” she said, blowing a cloud of cigarette smoke in my direction. “Why, it’s families, sweetheart.”

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